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THE SWAN
OF
VILAMORTA



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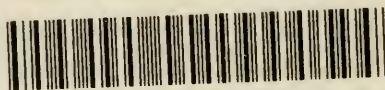


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THE
SWAN OF VILAMORTA

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BY
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NEW YORK
CASSELL PUBLISHING COMPANY
104 & 106 FOURTH AVENUE

2636
PRIME

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THE MERSHON COMPANY PRESS,
RAHWAY, N. J.

THE
SWAN OF VILAMORTA.

I.

BEHIND the pine grove the setting sun had left a zone of fire against which the trunks of the pine trees stood out like bronze columns. The path was rugged and uneven, giving evidence of the ravages wrought by the winter rains; at intervals loose stones, looking like teeth detached from the gum, rendered it still more impracticable. The melancholy shades of twilight were beginning to envelop the landscape; little by little the sunset glow faded away and the moon, round and silvery, mounted in the heavens, where the evening star was already shining. The dismal croaking of the frogs fell sharply on the ear; a fresh breeze stirred the dry plants and the dusty brambles that grew by the roadside; and the trunks of the pine trees grew momentarily blacker, standing out like inky bars against the pale green of the horizon.

A man was descending the path slowly, bent, apparently, on enjoying the poetry and the peace of the scene and the hour. He carried a stout walking-stick, and as far as one could judge in the fading light, he was young and not ill-looking.

He paused frequently, casting glances to the right and to the left as if in search of some familiar landmark. Finally he stood still and looked around him. At his back was a hill crowned with chestnut trees; on his left was the pine grove; on his right a small church with a mean belfry; before him the outlying houses of the town. He turned, walked back some ten steps, stopped, fronting the portico of the church, examined its walls, and, satisfied at last that he had found the right place, raised his hands to his mouth and forming with them a sort of speaking trumpet, cried, in a clear youthful voice:

“Echo, let us talk together!”

From the angle formed by the walls, there came back instantly another voice, deeper and less distinct, strangely grave and sonorous, which repeated with emphasis, linking the answer to the question and dwelling upon the final syllable:

“Let us talk togethe-e-e-r!”

“Are you happy?”

“Happy-y-y-y!” responded the echo.

“Who am I?”

“I-I-I-I!”

To these interrogations, framed so that the answer should make sense with them, succeeded phrases uttered without any other object than that of hearing them reverberated with strange intensity by the wall. “It is a lovely night.”—“The moon is shining.”—“The sun has set.”—“Do you hear me, echo?”—“Have you dreams, echo, of glory, ambition, love?” The traveler, enchanted with his occupation, continued the conversation, varying the words, combining them into sentences, and, in the short intervals of silence, he listened to the faint murmur of the pines stirred by the evening breeze, and to the melancholy concert of the frogs. The crimson and rose-colored clouds had become ashen and had begun to invade the broad region of the firmament over which the unclouded moon shed her silvery light. The honeysuckles and elder-flowers on the outskirts of the pine grove embalmed the air with subtle and intoxicating fragrance. And the interlocutor of the echo, yielding to the poetic influences of the scene, ceased his questions and exclamations and began to recite, in a slow, chanting voice, verses of Bécquer, paying no heed now to the voice from the wall, which, in its haste to repeat

his words, returned them to him broken and confused.

Absorbed in his occupation, pleased with the harmonious sounds of the verse, he did not notice the approach of three men of odd and grotesque appearance, wearing enormous broad-brimmed felt hats. One of the men was leading a mule laden with a leathern sack filled, doubtless, with the juice of the grape; and as they walked slowly, and the soft clayey soil deadened the noise of their footsteps, they passed close by the young man, unperceived by him. They exchanged some whispered words with one another. "Who is he, man?"—"Segundo."—"The lawyer's son?"—"The same."—"What is he doing? Is he talking to himself?"—"No, he is talking to the wall of Santa Margarita."—"Well, we have as good a right to do that as he has."—"Begin you ——"—"One—two—here goes——"

And from those profane lips fell a shower of vile words and coarse and vulgar phrases, interrupting the *Oscuras Golondrinas* which the young man was reciting with a great deal of expression, and producing, in the peaceful and harmonious nocturnal silence, the effect of the clatter of brass pans and kettles in a piece of German music. The most refined expressions were in the following style:

“D—— (here an oath). Hurrah for the wine of the Border! Hurrah for the red wine that gives courage to man! D——” (the reader’s imagination may supply what followed, it being premised that the disturbers of the Becquerian dreamer were three lawless muleteers who were carrying with them an abundant provision of the blood of the grape).

The nymph who dwelt in the wall opposed no resistance to the profanation and repeated the round oaths as faithfully as she had repeated the poet’s verses. Hearing the vociferations and bursts of laughter which the wall sent back to him mockingly, Segundo, the lawyer’s son, aware that the barbarians were turning his sentimental amusement into ridicule, became enraged. Mortified and ashamed, he tightened his grasp on his stick, strongly tempted to break it on the ribs of some one of them; and, muttering between his teeth, “Kaffirs! brutes! beasts!” and other offensive epithets, he turned to the left, plunged into the pine grove and walked toward the town, avoiding the path in order to escape meeting the profane trio.

The town was but a step away. The walls of its nearest houses shone white in the moonlight, and the stones of some buildings in course of erection, garden walls, orchards, and vegetable beds, filled up the

space between the town and the pine grove. The path grew gradually broader, until it reached the high-road, on either side of which leafy chestnut trees cast broad patches of shade. The town was already asleep, seemingly, for not a light was to be seen, nor were any of those noises to be heard which reveal the proximity of those human beehives called cities. Vilamorta is in reality a very small beehive, a modest town, the capital of a district. Bathed in the splendor of the romantic satellite, however, it was not without a certain air of importance imparted to it by the new buildings, of a style of architecture peculiar to prison cells, which an *Americanized* Galician, recently returned to his native land with a plentiful supply of cash, was erecting with all possible expedition.

Segundo turned into an out-of-the-way street—if there be any such in towns like Vilamorta. Only the sidewalks were paved; the gutter was a gutter in reality; it was full of muddy pools and heaps of kitchen garbage, thrown there without scruple by the inhabitants. Segundo avoided two things—stepping into the gutter and walking in the moonlight. A man passed so close by him as almost to touch him, enveloped, notwithstanding the heat, in an ample cloak, and holding open above his head an enor-

mous umbrella, although there was no sign of rain; doubtless he was some convalescent, some visitor to the springs, who was breathing the pleasant night air with hygienic precautions. Segundo, when he saw him, walked closer to the houses, turning his face aside as if afraid of being recognized. With no less caution he crossed the Plaza del Consistorio, the pride of Vilamorta, and then, instead of joining one of the groups who were enjoying the fresh air, seated on the stone benches round the public fountain, he slipped into a narrow side street, and crossing a retired little square shaded by a gigantic poplar turned his steps in the direction of a small house half hidden in the shadow of the tree. Between the house and Segundo there stood a lumbering bulk—the body of a stage-coach, a large box on wheels, its shafts raised in air, waiting, lance in rest, as it were, to renew the attack. Segundo skirted the obstacle, and as he turned the corner of the square, absorbed in his meditations, two immense hogs, monstrously fat, rushed out of the half-open gate of a neighboring yard, and at a short trot that made their enormous sides shake like jelly, made straight for the admirer of Becquer, entangling themselves stupidly and blindly between his legs. By a special interposition of Providence the young man did not

measure his length upon the ground, but, his patience now exhausted, he gave each of the swine a couple of angry kicks, which drew from them sharp and ferocious grunts, as he ejaculated almost audibly: "What a town is this, good Heavens! Even the hogs must run against one in the streets. Ah, what a miserable place! Hell itself could not be worse!"

By the time he had reached the door of the house, he had, to some extent, regained his composure. The house was small and pretty and had a cheerful air. There was no railing outside the windows, only the stone ledges, which were covered with plants in pots and boxes; through the windows shaded by muslin curtains a light could be seen burning, and in the silent façade there was something peaceful and attractive that invited one to enter. Segundo pushed open the door and almost at the same instant there was heard in the dark hall the rustling of skirts, a woman's arms were opened and the admirer of Becquer, throwing himself into them, allowed himself to be led, dragged, carried bodily, almost, up the stairs, and into the little parlor where, on a table covered with a white crochet cover, burned a carefully trimmed lamp. There, on the sofa, the lover and the lady seated themselves.

Truth before all things. The lady was not far from thirty-six or thirty-seven, and what is worse, could never have been pretty, or even passably good-looking. The smallpox had pitted and hardened her coarse skin, giving it the appearance of the leather bottom of a sieve. Her small black eyes, hard and bright like two fleas, matched well her nose, which was thick and ill-shaped, like the noses of the figures of lay monks stamped on chocolate. True, the mouth was fresh-colored, the teeth white and sound like those of a dog; but everything else pertaining to her—dress, manner, accent, the want of grace of the whole—was calculated rather to put tender thoughts to flight than to awaken them. With the lamp shining as brightly as it does, it is preferable to contemplate the lover. The latter is of medium height, has a graceful, well-proportioned figure, and in the turn of his head and in his youthful features there is something that irresistibly attracts and holds the gaze. His forehead, which is high and straight, is shaded and set off by luxuriant hair, worn somewhat longer than is allowed by our present severe fashion. His face, thin and delicately outlined, casts a shadow on the walls which is made up of acute angles. A mustache, curling with the grace which is peculiar to a first mustache, and to

the wavy locks of a young girl, shades but does not cover his upper lip. The beard has not yet attained its full growth; the muscles of the throat have not yet become prominent; the Adam's apple does not yet force itself on the attention. The complexion is dark, pale, and of a slightly bilious hue.

Seeing this handsome youth leaning his head on the shoulder of this woman of mature age and undisguised ugliness, it would have been natural to take them for mother and son, but anyone coming to this conclusion, after a single moment's observation, would have shown scant penetration, for in the manifestations of maternal affection, however passionate and tender they may be, there is always a something of dignity and repose which is wanting in those of every other affection.

Doubtless Segundo felt a longing to see the moon again, for he rose almost immediately from his seat on the sofa and crossed over to the window, his companion following him. He threw open the sash, and they sat down side by side in two low chairs whose seats were on a level with the flower-pots. A fine carnation regaled the sense with its intoxicating perfume; the moon lighted up with her silvery rays the foliage of the poplar that cast broad shadow

over the little square. Segundo opened the conversation this wise :

“Have you made any cigars for me?”

“Here are some,” she answered, putting her hand into her pocket and drawing from it a bundle of cigars. “I was able to make only a dozen and a half for you. I will complete the two dozen to-night before I go to bed.”

There was a moment's silence, broken by the sharp sound made by the striking of the match and then, in a voice muffled by the first puff of smoke, Segundo went on :

“Why, has anything new happened?”

“New? No. The children—putting the house in order—and then—Minguitos. He made my head ache with his complaining—he complained the whole blessed evening. He said his bones ached. And you? Very busy, killing yourself reading, studying, writing, eh? Of course!”

“No, I have been taking a delightful walk. I went to Peñas-albas and returned by way of Santa Margarita. I have seldom spent a pleasanter evening.”

“I warrant you were making verses.”

“No, my dear. The verses I made I made last night after leaving you.”

“Ah! And you weren't going to repeat them to me. Come, for the love of the saints, come, recite them for me, you must know them by heart. Come, darling.”

To this vehement entreaty succeeded a passionate kiss, pressed on the hair and forehead of the poet. The latter raised his eyes, drew back a little and, holding his cigar between his fingers after knocking off the ashes with his nail, proceeded to recite.

The offspring of his muse was a poem in imitation of Becquer. His auditor, who listened to it with religious attention, thought it superior to anything inspired by the muse of the great Gustave. And she asked for another and then another, and then a bit of Espronceda and then a fragment or two of Zorrilla. By this time the cigar had gone out; the poet threw away the stump and lighted a fresh one. Then they resumed their conversation.

“Shall we have supper soon?”

“Directly. What do you think I have for you?”

“I haven't the least idea.”

“Think of what you like best. What you like best, better than anything else.”

“Bah! You know that so far as I am concerned, provided you don't give me anything smoked or greasy——”

“A French omelet! You couldn't guess, eh? Let me tell you—I found the receipt in a book. As I had heard that it was something good I wanted to try it. I had always made omelets as they make them here, so stiff, that you might throw one against the wall without breaking it. But this—I think it will be to your taste. As for me, I don't like it much, I prefer the old style. I showed Flores how to make it. What was in the one you ate at the inn at Orense? Chopped parsley, eh?”

“No, ham. But what difference does it make what was in it?”

“I'll run and take it out of the pantry! I thought—the book says parsley! Wait, wait.”

She overturned her chair in her haste. An instant later the jingling of her keys and the opening and closing of a couple of doors were heard in the distance. A husky voice muttered some unintelligible words in the kitchen. In two minutes she was back again.

“Tell me, and those verses, are you not going to publish them? Am I not going to see them in print?”

“Yes,” responded the poet, slowly turning his head to one side and sending a puff of smoke through his lips. “I am going to send them to Vigo,

to Roberto Blanquez, to insert them in the *Amanecer*."

"I am delighted! You will become famous, sweetheart! How many periodicals have spoken of you?"

Segundo laughed ironically and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not many." And with a somewhat preoccupied air he let his gaze wander over the plants and far away over the top of the poplar whose leaves rustled gently in the breeze. The poet pressed his companion's hand mechanically, and the latter returned the pressure with passionate ardor.

"Of course. How do you expect them to speak of you when you don't put your name to your verses?" she said. "They don't know whose they are. They are wondering, likely——"

"What difference does the name make? They could say the same things of the pseudonym I have adopted as of Segundo García. The few people who will trouble themselves to read my verses will call me the Swan of Vilamorta."

II.

SEGUNDO GARCÍA, the lawyer's son, and Leocadia Otero, the schoolmistress of Vilamorta, had met each other for the first time in the spring at a pilgrimage. Leocadia had gone with some girls to whom she had taught their letters and plain sewing. Before the chorus of nymphs Segundo had recited verses for more than two hours in an oak grove far from the noise of the drum and the bagpipes, where the strains of the music and the voices of the crowd came softened by distance. The audience was as silent as if they were hearing mass, although certain passages of a tender or passionate nature were the occasion, among the children, of nudges, pinches, laughter instantaneously suppressed; but from the black eyes of the schoolmistress, down her cheeks, pitted by the smallpox and pale with emotion, flowed two large, warm tears, followed so quickly and in such abundance by others that she was obliged to take out her handkerchief to wipe them away. And returning by starlight, descending the mountain on whose summit stood the sanctuary, by

sylvan footpaths carpeted with grass and bordered with heather and briars, the order of march was as follows: first the children, running, jumping, pushing one another among the heather and greeting every fall with shouts of laughter; Leocadia and Segundo behind, arm-in-arm, pausing from time to time to talk in subdued tones, almost in whispers.

A sad and ugly story was told about Leocadia Otero. Although, without actually saying so, she had given it to be understood that she was a widow, it was whispered that she had never been married; that the puny Dominguito, the little cripple who was always sick, was born while she lived in the house of her uncle and guardian at Orense, after the death of her parents. What was certain was that her uncle had died shortly after the birth of the child, bequeathing to his niece a couple of fields and a house in Vilamorta, and Leocadia, after passing the necessary examinations, had obtained the village school and gone to settle in that town. She had lived in it now for more than thirteen years, observing the most exemplary conduct, watching day and night over Minguitos, and living with the utmost frugality in order to rebuild the dilapidated house, which she had finally succeeded in doing shortly before her meeting with Segundo. Leocadia was a

woman of notably industrious habits; in her wardrobe she had always a good supply of linen, in her parlor bamboo furniture with a rug before the sofa, grapes, rice, and ham in her pantry, and carnations and sweet basil in her windows. Minguitos was always as neat as a new pin; she herself, when she raised the skirt of her habit of Dolores, of good merino, displayed underneath voluminous embroidered petticoats, stiff with starch. For all which reasons, notwithstanding her ugliness and her former history, the schoolmistress was not without suitors—a wealthy retired muleteer, and Cansin, the clothier. She rejected the suitors and continued living alone with Minguitos and Flores, her old servant, who now enjoyed in the house all the privileges of a grandmother.

The iniquitous wrong suffered by her in early youth had produced in Leocadia, absorbed as she was in her bitter recollections, a profound horror of marriage and an insatiable thirst for the romantic, the ideal, which is as a refreshing dew to the imagination and which satisfies the emotions. She had the superficial knowledge of a village schoolmistress—rudimentary, but sufficient to introduce exotic tastes into Vilamorta; that is to say, a taste for literature in its most accessible forms—novels and poetry. She

devoted to reading the leisure hours of her monotonous and upright life. She read with faith, with enthusiasm, uncritically; she read believing and accepting everything, identifying herself with each one of the heroines, in turn, her heart echoing back the poet's sighs, the troubadour's songs, and the laments of the bard. Reading was her one vice, her secret happiness. When she requested her friends at Orense to renew her subscription to the library for her they laughed at her and nicknamed her the "Authoress." She an authoress! She only wished she were. If she could only give form to what she felt, to the world of fancy she carried in her mind! But this was impossible. Never would her brain succeed in producing, however hard she might squeeze it, even so much as a poor *seguidilla*. Poetry and sensibility were stored up in the folds and convolutions of her brain, as solar heat is stored up in the coal. What came to the surface was pure prose—housekeeping, economy, stews.

When she met Segundo, chance applied the lighted torch to the formidable train of feelings and dreams shut up in the soul of the schoolmistress. She had at last found a worthy employment for her amorous faculties, an outlet for her affections. Segundo was poetry incarnate. He represented for her all the

graces, all the divine attributes of poetry—the flowers, the breeze, the nightingale, the dying light of day, the moon, the dark wood.

The fire burned with astounding rapidity. In its flames were consumed, first her honorable resolution to efface by the blamelessness of her conduct the stigma of the past, then her strong and deep maternal affection. Not for an instant did the thought present itself to Leocadia's mind that Segundo could ever be her husband; although both were free the difference in their ages and the intellectual superiority of the young poet placed an insurmountable barrier in the way of the aspirations of the schoolmistress. She fell in love as into an abyss, and looked neither before nor behind.

Segundo had had in Santiago, during his college days, youthful intrigues, adventures of a not very serious nature, such as few men escape between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, occasionally taking part, also, in what in that romantic epoch were called *orgies*. Notwithstanding all this, however, he was not vicious. The son of a hysterical mother, whose strength was exhausted by repeated lactations, and who at last succumbed to the debility induced by them, Segundo's spirit was much more exacting and insatiable than his body. He had in-

herited from his mother a melancholy temperament and innumerable prejudices, innumerable instinctive antipathies, innumerable superstitious practices. He had loved her, and he cherished her memory with veneration. And more tenacious even than his loving remembrance of his mother was the invincible antipathy he cherished for his father. It would not be true to say that the lawyer had been the murderer of his wife, and yet Segundo clearly divined the slow martyrdom endured by that fine nervous organization, and had always before his eyes, in his hours of gloom, the mean coffin in which the dead woman was interred, shrouded in the oldest sheet that was to be found.

Segundo's family consisted of his father, an aunt, advanced in years, two brothers, and three sisters. The lawyer García enjoyed the reputation of being wealthy—in reality this fortune was insignificant—a village fortune accumulated penny by penny, by usurious loans and innumerable sordid privations. His practice brought him in something, but ten mouths to feed and the professional education of three sons swallowed up not a little. The eldest of the boys, an officer in an infantry regiment, was stationed in the Philippine Islands, and, far from expecting any money from him, they were thankful if he

did not ask for any. Segundo, the second in age as well as in name, had just been graduated—one lawyer more in Spain, where this fruit grows so abundantly. The youngest was studying at the Institute at Orense, with the intention of becoming an apothecary. The girls spent the days running about in the gardens and cornfields, half the time barefooted, not even attending Leocadia's school to save the slight expense that would be incurred in procuring the decent clothing which this would necessitate. As for the aunt—Misía Gáspara—she was the soul of the house, a narrow and sapless soul, a withered old woman, silent and ghost-like in appearance, still active, in spite of her sixty years, who, without ceasing to knit her stockings with fingers as yellow as the keys of an old harpsichord, sold barley in the granary, wine in the cellar, lent a dollar at fifty per cent. interest to the fruit-women and hucksters of the market, receiving their wares in payment, measured out the food, the light, and their clothing to her nieces, fattened a pig with affectionate solicitude, and was respected in Vilamorta for her ant-like abilities.

It was the lawyer's aspiration to transmit his practice and his office to Segundo. Only the boy gave no indication of an aptitude for stirring up law-suits ✓

and prosecutions. How had he achieved the miracle of passing with honor in the examinations without ever having opened a law-book during the whole term, and failing in attendance at the college whenever it rained or whenever the sun shone? Well, by means of an excellent memory and a good natural intelligence; learning by heart, when it was necessary, whole pages from the text-books, and remembering and reciting them with the same ease, if not with as much taste, as he recited the "Doloras" of Campoamor.

On Segundo's table lay, side by side, the works of Zorrilla and Espronceda, bad translations of Heine, books of verse of local poets, the "Lamas-Varela," or, *Antidote to Idleness*, and other volumes of a no less heterogeneous kind. Segundo was not an insatiable reader; he chose his reading according to the whim of the moment, and he read only what was in conformity with his tastes, thus acquiring a superficial culture of an imperfect and varied nature. Quick of apprehension, rather than thoughtful or studious, he had learned French without a teacher and almost by intuition, in order to read in the original the works of Musset, Lamartine, Proudhon, and Victor Hugo. His mind was like an uncultivated field in which grew here and there some rare and beautiful flower,

some exotic plant; of the abstruse and positive sciences, of solid and serious learning, which is the nurse of mental vigor—the classics, the best literature, the severe teachings of history—he knew nothing; and in exchange, by a singular phenomenon of intellectual relationship, he identified himself with the romantic movement of the second third of the century, and in a remote corner of Galicia lived again the psychological life of dead and gone generations. So does some venerable academician, overleaping the nineteen centuries of our era, delight himself now with what delighted Horace and live platonically enamored of Lydia.

Segundo composed his first verses, cynical and pessimistic in intention, ingenuous in reality, before he had reached the age of seventeen. His classmates applauded him to the echo. He acquired in their eyes a certain prestige, and when the first fruits of his muse appeared in a periodical he had, without going beyond the narrow circle of the college, admirers and detractors. Thenceforth he acquired the right to indulge in solitary walks, to laugh rarely, to surround his adventures with mystery, and not to play or take a drink for good-fellowship's sake except when he felt in the humor.

And he seldom felt in the humor. Excitation of

the senses, of a purely physical nature, possessed no attraction for him; if he drank at times through bravado, the spectacle of drunkenness, the winding-up of student orgies—the soiled tablecloth, the maudlin disputes, his companions lying under the table or stretched on the sofa, the shamelessness and heartlessness of venal women—repelled him and he came away from such scenes filled with disgust and contempt, and at times a reaction proper to his complex character sent him, a sincere admirer of Proudhon, Quinet, and Renan, to the precincts of some solitary church, where he drew in with delight long breaths of the incense-laden air.

The lawyer García made no protest against his son's literary inclinations because he regarded them as a passing amusement proper to his age, a youthful folly, like dancing at a village feast. He began to grow uneasy when he saw that Segundo, after graduation, showed no inclination to help him in the conduct of his tortuous law-suits. Was the boy, then, going to turn out good for nothing but to string rhymes together? It was no crime to do this, but—when there was not a pile of law-papers to go through and stratagems to think of to circumvent the opposing party. Since the lawyer had observed this inclination of his son he had treated him with

more persistent harshness and coldness than before. Every day at table or whenever the occasion offered, he made cutting speeches to him about the necessity of earning one's own bread by assiduous labor, instead of depending upon others for it. These continual sermons, in which he displayed the same captious and harassing obstinacy as in the conduct of his law-suits, frightened Segundo from the house. In Leocadia's house he found a place of refuge, and he submitted passively to be adored; flattered in the first place by the triumph his verses had obtained, awakening admiration so evidently sincere and ardent, and in the second place attracted by the moral well-being engendered by unquestioning approval and unmeasured complacency. His idle, dreamy brain reposed on the soft cushions which affection smoothes for the beloved head; Leocadia sympathized with all his plans for the future, developing and enlarging them; she encouraged him to write and to publish his verses; she praised him without reserve and without hypocrisy, for, for her, whose critical faculty was situated in her cardiac cavities, Segundo was the most melodious singer in the universe.

Gradually the loving prevision of the schoolmistress extended to other departments of Segundo's

existence. Neither the lawyer García nor Aunt Gáspara supposed that a young man, once his education was finished, needed a penny for any extraordinary expense. Aunt Gáspara, in particular, protested loudly at every fresh outlay—after filling her nephew's trunk one year she thought he was provided with shirts for at least ten years to come; clothes had no right to tear or to wear out, without any consideration, in that way. Leocadia took note of the wants of her idol; one day she observed that he was not well supplied with handkerchiefs and she hemmed and marked a dozen for him; the next day she noticed that he was expected to keep himself in cigars for a year on half a dollar, and she took upon herself the task of making them for him, furnishing the material herself gratis. She heard the fruit-women criticising Aunt Gáspara's stinginess; she inferred from this that Segundo had a poor table, and she set herself to the task of devising appetizing and nutritious dishes for him; in addition to all which she ordered books from Orense, mended his clothes, and sewed on his buttons.

All this she did with inexpressible delight, going about the house with a light, almost youthful step, rejuvenated by the sweet maternity of love, and so happy that she forgot to scold the school-children,

thinking only of shortening their tasks that she might be all the sooner with Segundo. There was in her affection much that was generous and spiritual, and her happiest moments were those in which, as they sat side by side at the window, his head resting on her shoulder, she listened, while her imagination transformed the pots of carnations and sweet basil into a virgin forest, to the verses which he recited in a well-modulated voice, verses that seemed to Leocadia celestial music.

The medal had its obverse side, however. The mornings were full of bitterness when Flores would come with an angry and frowning face, her woolen shawl twisted and wrinkled and falling over her eyes, to say in short, abrupt phrases:

“The eggs are all used; shall I get more? There is no sugar; which kind shall I buy—that dear loaf sugar that we bought last week? To-day I got coffee, two pounds of coffee, as if we had a gold mine. I won’t buy any more cordial—you can go for it yourself—I won’t.”

“What are you talking about, Flores? What is the matter with you?”

“I say that if you like to give Ramon, the confectioner, twenty-four reals a bottle for *anisette*, when it is to be had for eight at the apothecary’s, you can

do so, but that I am not going to put the money in that thief's hand; he will be asking you five dollars a bottle for it next."

Leocadia would come out of her reverie with a sigh, and go to the bureau drawer for the money, not without thinking*that Flores was only too right; her savings, her couple of thousand reals laid by for an emergency, must be almost gone; it was better not to examine into the condition of the purse; better put off annoyances as long as possible. God would provide. And she would scold the old woman with feigned anger.

"Go for the bottle; go—and don't make me angry. At eight the children will be here and I have my petticoat to iron yet. Make Minguitos his chocolate; you would be better employed in seeing that he has something to eat. And give him some cake."

"Yes. I'll give him some, I'll give him some. If I didn't give the poor child something——" grumbled the servant, who at Minguitos' name felt her anger increase. In the kitchen could be heard the furious knock given to the chocolate-pot to settle it on the fire and the angry sound of the mill, afterward, beating the chocolate into froth. Flores would enter the room of the deformed boy, who had not yet left his bed, and taking his hand in hers, say:

"Are you warm, child? I have brought you your chocolate; do you hear?"

"Will mamma give it to me?"

"I will give it to you."

"And mamma—what is she doing?"

"Ironing some petticoats."

The little humpback would fix his eyes on Flores, raising his head with difficulty from between the double arch of the breast and back. His eyes were deep set, with large pupils; on his mouth, with its prominent jaws, rested a melancholy and distorted smile. Throwing his arms around the neck of Flores, and putting his lips close to her ear:

"Did the *other one* come yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes, child, yes."

"Will he come again to-day?"

"He'll come. Of course he'll come! Stop talking, *fillino*, stop talking and take your chocolate. It's as you like it—thin and with froth."

"I don't think I have any appetite for it. Put it there beside me."

III.

IN Vilamorta there was a Casino, a real Casino, small indeed, and shabby, besides, but with its billiard-table, bought at second-hand, and its *boy*, an old man of seventy, who once a year dusted and brushed the green cover. For the only reunions in the Casino of Vilamorta were those of the rats and the moths who assembled daily, to amuse themselves by eating away the woodwork. The chief centers of reunion were the two apothecaries' shops, that of Doña Eufrasia, fronting the Plaza and that of Agonde in the high street. Doña Eufrasia's shop, nestling in the shadowy corner of an archway, was dark; in the hours of meeting it was lighted by a smoky kerosene lamp; its furniture consisted of four grimy chairs and a bench.

From the street all that was to be seen were dark mass-cloaks, overcoats, broad-brimmed hats, two or three clerical tonsures that shone at a distance like metal clasps against the dark background of the shop. Agonde's shop, on the contrary, was brightly illuminated and gloried in the possession of six glass globes

of brilliant coloring and fantastic effect, three rows of shelves laden with imposing and scientific-looking white porcelain jars bearing Latin inscriptions in black letters, a divan, and two leather-covered arm-chairs. The two contrasting shops were also antagonistic; they had declared war to the knife against each other.

Agonde's shop, liberal and enlightened in its opinions, said of the reactionary shop that it was a center of unending conspiracies, where *El Cuartel Real* and all the rebel proclamations had been read during the civil war, and where for the past five years ammunition-belts were being diligently prepared for a Carlist party that never took the field; and according to the reactionary shop, that of Agonde was the headquarters of the Freemasons; where lampoons were printed on a little handpress and where gambling was shamelessly carried on. The meetings in the reactionary shop broke up with religious punctuality at ten, in winter, and eleven in summer, while the liberal shop continued to cast on the sidewalk until midnight the light of its two bright lamps and the blue, red, and emerald-green reflections of its glass globes; for which reasons the members of the liberal reunion called those of the other party *owls*, while those of the reactionary clique gave their opponents

the name of *members of the Casino of the Gaming Table*.

Segundo never put his foot over the threshold of the reactionary shop and, since the beginning of his acquaintance with Leocadia Otero, he had shunned that of Agonde also, for his vanity was wounded by the jests and gibes of the apothecary, who was noted for his waggish humor. One evening as Saturnino Agonde was crossing the Plaza of the Alamo at an unusually late hour—on his way the devil only knew whither—he had caught sight of Leocadia and Segundo seated at the window, and had heard the psalmody of the verses which the poet was declaiming. From that time Segundo had seen depicted on the countenance of Agonde, a practical man of a sanguine temperament, such contempt for sentimental trifling and for poetry that he instinctively avoided him as far as it was possible to do so. Occasionally, however, whenever he desired to read *El Imparcial*, to know what was going on, he would stop in at the shop for a few moments. He did so on the day after his conversation with the echo.

The meeting was very animated. Segundo's father was leaning back on the sofa with a newspaper resting on his knees; his brother-in-law, the notary Genday, Ramon, the confectioner, and

Agonde were hotly disputing with him. At the further end of the shop Carmelo, the tobacconist, Don Fermin, alias *Tropiczo*,¹ the physician, the secretary of the Municipality and the Alcalde sat playing *tresillo* at a small table. When Segundo entered, he remarked something unusual in the air of his father and of the group that surrounded him, but certain that he would presently be told the cause, he silently dropped into an armchair, lighted a cigar, and took up the copy of *El Imparcial* that was lying on the counter.

"Well, the papers here say nothing, absolutely nothing, about it," exclaimed the confectioner.

From the *tresillo* table came the voice of the doctor confirming Ramon's doubts; the doctor, too, was of the opinion that the event in question could not happen without due notice of it being given in the papers.

"You would die rather than believe anything," replied Agonde. "I am certain of it, I tell you, and it seems to me that when I am certain of it——"

"And I too," affirmed Genday. "If it is necessary to call witnesses to prove it, they are there. I know it from my own brother, who heard it from Mendez de las Vides; you can judge whether I have the

¹ Trip.

news on good authority or not. Do you want further proof? Well, two armchairs, a handsome gilt bedstead, a great deal of china and a piano have been ordered from Orense for Las Vides. Are you convinced?"

"In any case they will not come as soon as you say," objected Tropiczo.

"They will come at the time I have said. Don Victoriano wants to spend the holidays and the vintage season here; they say he longs to see his native place again, and that he has spoken of nothing all the winter but the journey."

"He is coming to die here," said Tropiczo; "I heard that he was in a very bad state of health. You are going to be left without a leader."

"Go to—— What a devil of a man, what an owl, always predicting misfortunes! Either hold your tongue, or talk sense. Attend to the game, as you ought to."

Segundo was gazing abstractedly at the glass globes of the shop, his attention seemingly occupied with the blue, green, and red points of light that sparkled in their center. He understood now the subject of their conversation—the expected arrival of Don Victoriano Andres de la Comba, the minister, the great political leader of the country, the

radical representative of the district. What mattered to Segundo the arrival of this pretentious coxcomb! And giving himself up to the enjoyment of his cigar, he allowed the noisy dispute to go on unheeded. Afterward he became absorbed in the reading of an article in *El Imparcial*, in which a new poet was warmly eulogized.

Meanwhile at the tresillo table matters were becoming complicated. The apothecary, who sat behind the Alcalde, was giving him advice—a delicate and difficult task.

The tobacconist and Don Fermin held all the good cards; they had the man between them—a ticklish position. The Alcalde was a thin shriveled-up old man, of a very timid disposition, who, before he ventured to play a card, would think a hundred years about it, calculating all the contingencies and all the possible combinations of which cards are capable. He did not want now to play that *solo*. It would be a great mistake! But the impetuous Agonde encouraged him, saying: "Come! I buy it." Thus urged, the Alcalde came to a decision, but not without having first entered a protest:

"Very well, I'll play it, but it is a piece of folly, gentlemen—so that you may not say I am afraid."

And all that he had foreseen happened; he found

himself between two fires: on the one side his king of hearts is trumped, on the other his opponent takes his knave of trumps with his queen. Don Fermin wins the trick without knowing how, while the tobacconist, who is smiling maliciously, keeps all his good cards. The Alcalde lifts his eyes appealingly to Agonde.

“Didn’t I tell you so? A nice fix we have got ourselves into! We shall lose the hand; it is lost already.”

“No, man, no. What a coward you are—always afraid of everything. There you are hesitating as long about throwing a card as if your life depended on it. Play a trump! play a trump! That is the way cowards always lose—they are afraid to play their trumps.”

The opponents winked at each other maliciously.

“*De posita non tibi,*” exclaimed the tobacconist.

“*Si codillum non resultabit,*” assented Don Fermin.

The Alcalde, quaking with fear, proceeded, by Agonde’s advice, to look through the tricks his partners had taken, in order to see how many trumps had been already played. Tropiezo and the tobacconist protested:

What a mania he had for examining the cards!

The Alcalde, somewhat tranquillized, resolved at last to put an end to his uncertainty, and with a few bold and decisive plays the hand ended, each player winning three tricks.

"A tie!" exclaimed the tobacconist and the apothecary almost simultaneously.

"You see! Playing as badly as you could you haven't lost the hand," said Agonde. "They needed all their cards to win what they did."

They were all absorbed in the game—whose interest was now at its height—with the exception of Segundo, who had abandoned himself to one of those idle reveries in which the activity of the imagination is stimulated by bodily ease. The voices of the players reached his ears like a distant murmur; he was a hundred leagues away; he was thinking of the article he had just been reading, of which certain expressions particularly encomiastic—mellifluous phrases in which the critic artfully glossed over the faults of the poet—had remained stamped on his memory. When would his turn come to be judged by the Madrid press? God alone knew. He lent his attention once more to the conversation.

"We must at least give him a serenade," declared Genday.

"A serenade, indeed!" responded Agonde. "A

great thing that! Something more than a serenade—we must have some sort of a procession—a demonstration which will show that the people here are with him. We must appoint a committee to receive him with rockets and bands of music. Let those plotters at Doña Eufrasia's have something to rage about."

The name of the other shop produced a storm of exclamations, jests, and stamping of feet.

"Have you heard the news?" asked the waggish Tropiezo. "It seems that Nocedal has written a very flattering letter to Doña Eufrasia, saying that as he represents Don Carlos in Madrid so she, by reason of her merits, ought to represent him in Vilamorta."

Homeric bursts of laughter and a general huzza greeted this remark.

"Well, that may be an invention; but it is true, true as gospel, that Doña Eufrasia sent Don Carlos her likeness with a complimentary inscription."

"And the regiment? Have they fixed on the day on which it is to take the field?"

"Of course. They say that the Abbot of Lubrego is to command it."

The hilarity of the assembly was redoubled, for the Abbot of Lubrego was nearing his seventieth

year, and was so feeble that he could scarcely hold himself on his mule. A boy at this moment entered the shop, swinging in his hand a glass bottle.

"Don Saturnino!" he cried, in a shrill voice.

"What is it you want?" answered the druggist, mimicking his tones.

"Give me some of what this smells like."

"All right," said Agonde, putting the bottle to his nose. "What does this smell like, Don Fermin?"

"Let me see—it smells something like—laudanum, eh?—or arnica?"

"Arnica let it be, it is less dangerous. I hope it will have a good effect."

"It is time to retire, gentlemen," said the Lawyer García, consulting his silver timepiece.

Genday stood up and Segundo followed his example.

The tresillo party proceeded to settle accounts; calculating winnings and losses, centavo by centavo, by means of white counters and yellow counters. After the close atmosphere of the shop the cool air of the street was grateful; the night was mild and clear; the stars shone with a friendly light and Segundo, who was quick to perceive the poetic aspect of things, felt tempted to leave his father and his uncle without ceremony and walk along the road, alone,

according to his custom, to enjoy the beauty of the night. But his Uncle Genday linked his arm through his, saying:

“You are to be congratulated, my boy.”

“Congratulated, uncle?”

“Weren’t you crazy to get away from here? Didn’t you want to take your flight to some other place? Haven’t you a hatred for office work?”

“Good man,” interposed the lawyer; “he is crazy enough as it is, and you want to unsettle his mind still more——”

“Hold your tongue, you fool! Don Victoriano is coming here, we will present the boy to him and ask him to give him a place. And he will give him one, and a good one too; for whether he thinks so or not, if he does not do what we ask him, the pancake will cost him a loaf. The district is not what he imagines it to be, and if his adherents do not keep their eyes open the clergy will play a trick upon them.”

“And Primo? And Mendez de las Vides?”

“They are no match for the priest. The day least expected they will be made a show of; they will hang their heads for shame. But you, my boy—think well about it. You are not in love with the law?”

Segundo shrugged his shoulders with a smile.

“Well, turn the matter over in your mind; think what would suit you best. For you must be something; you must stick your head in somewhere. Would you like a justiceship? a place in the post-office? in one of the departments?”

They had turned the corner of the Plaza on their way to García's house and were passing under Leocadia's window when the fragrance of the carnations penetrated to Segundo's brain. He felt a poetic revulsion of feeling and, dilating his nostrils to inhale the perfume, he exclaimed:

“Neither justice nor post-office employee. Say no more on that point, uncle.”

“Don't insist, Clodio,” said the lawyer bitterly. “He wants to be nothing, nothing but a downright idler, to spend his life scribbling rhymes. Neither more nor less. The money must be handed out for the Institute, the University, the shirt-front, the frock coat, the polished boots, and then, when one thinks they are ready to do for themselves, back they come, to be a burden to one, to smoke and to eat at one's expense. I have three sons to spend my money, to squeeze me dry, and not one to give me any help. That is all these young gentlemen are good for.”

Segundo stopped, twisting the end of his mus-

tache, with a frown on his face. They all stood still at the corner of the little plaza, as people are wont to do when a conversation changes to a dispute.

"I don't know what puts that into your head, father," declared the poet. "Do you suppose that I propose to myself never to be anything more than Segundo García, the lawyer's son? If you do, you are greatly mistaken. You may be very anxious to be rid of the burden of supporting me, but you are not half as anxious as I am to relieve you of it."

"Well, then, what are you waiting for? Your uncle is proposing a variety of things to you and none of them suits you. Do you want to begin by being Minister?"

The poet began to twist his mustache anew.

"There is no use in being impatient, father. I would make a very bad post-office clerk and a still worse justice. I don't want to tie myself down to any fixed career, in which everything is arranged beforehand and moves by routine. In that case I should be a lawyer like you or a notary like Uncle Genday. If we really find Don Victoriano disposed to do anything for me, ask some position—no matter what—without fixed duties, that will enable me to reside in Madrid. I will take care of the rest."

"You will take care of the rest. Yes, yes, you say

well. You will draw upon me for little sums, eh? like your brother in the Philippine Islands. Let me tell you for your guidance, then, that you needn't do so. I didn't steal what I have, and I don't coin money."

"I am not asking anything from you!" cried Segundo, in a burst of savage anger. "Am I in your way? I will get out of it, then; I will go to America. That ends it."

"No," said the lawyer, calming down. "Provided you exact no more sacrifices from me."

"Not one! not if I were starving!"

The lawyer's door opened; old Aunt Gáspara in her petticoat, looking like a fright, had come to let them in. Tied around her head was a cotton handkerchief which came so far over her face as almost to conceal her sour features. Segundo drew back at this picture of domestic life.

"Aren't you coming in?" asked his father.

"I am going with Uncle Genday."

"Are you coming back soon?"

"Directly."

Walking down the square he communicated his plans to Genday. The latter, a short man, with a fiery temper, signified his approbation by movements quick and restless as those of a lizard. His nephew's

ideas were not displeasing to him. His active, scheming mind, the mind of an electoral agent and a clever notary, accepted vast projects more readily than the methodical mind of the lawyer García. Uncle and nephew were much of the same way of thinking as to the best manner of profiting by Don Victoriano's influence; conversing in this way they reached Genday's house, and the servant of the latter—a fresh-looking girl—opened the door for her master with all the flattering obsequiousness of a confirmed old bachelor's maid-servant. Instead of returning home Segundo, preoccupied and excited, walked down the plaza to the highroad, stopped at the first clump of chestnut trees he came to, and seating himself on the step of a wooden cross which the Jesuits had erected there during the last mission, gave himself up to the harmless diversion of contemplating the evening star, the constellations, and all the splendors of the heavenly bodies.

IV.

DURING the tiresome *siestas* of Vilamorta, while the visitors to the springs digested their glasses of mineral water and compensated themselves for the loss of their morning sleep by a restorative nap, the amateur musicians of the popular band practiced by themselves the pieces they were shortly to execute together. From the shoemaker's shop came the melancholy notes of a flute; in the baker's resounded the lively and martial strains of the horn; in the tobacconist's moaned a clarionet; in the cloth-shop, the suppressed sighs of an ophicleide filled the air. Those who thus devoted themselves to the worship of Euterpe were clerks in shops, younger sons, the youthful element of Vilamorta. These snatches of melody rose with piercing sonorousness on the drowsy warm atmosphere. When the news spread that Don Victoriano Andres de la Comba and his family were expected to arrive within twenty-four hours in the town, to leave it again immediately for Las Vides, the brass band was tuned to the highest pitch and ready to deafen, with any number

of waltzes, dances, and quicksteps, the ears of the illustrious statesman.

In the town an unusual animation was noticeable. Agonde's house was opened, ventilated, and swept, clouds of dust issuing through the windows, at one of which, later on, appeared Agonde's sister, with a fringe of hair over her forehead and wearing a pearl-shell necklace. The housekeeper of the parish priest of Cebre, a famous cook, went busily about the kitchen, and the pounding of the mortar and the sizzling of oil could be heard. Two hours before the time of the arrival of the stage-coach from Orense, that is to say at three o'clock in the afternoon, the committee of the notabilities of the Combista-radical party were already crossing the plaza, and Agonde stood waiting on the threshold of his shop, having sacrificed to the solemnity of the occasion his classic cap and velvet slippers, and wearing patent-leather boots and a frock coat which made him look more bull-necked and pot-bellied than ever. The coach from Orense was entering the town from the side next the wood, and, at the tinkling of the bells, the clatter of the hoofs of its eight mules and ponies, the creaking of its unwieldy bulk, the inhabitants of Vilamorta looked out of their windows and came to their doors; the reactionary shop only re-

mained closed and hostile. When the cumbrous vehicle turned into the square the excitement increased; barefooted children climbed on the coach steps, begging an *ochavo* in whining accents; the fruit-women sitting in the arches straightened themselves up to obtain a better view, and only Cansin, the clothier, his hands in his trousers' pockets, his feet thrust into slippers, continued walking up and down his shop with an Olympic air of indifference. The overseer reined in the team, saying in soothing accents to a rebellious mule:

“E-e-e-e-e-h! There, there, Canóniga.”

The brass band, drawn up before the town-hall, burst into a deafening prelude, and the first rocket whizzed into the air sending forth a shower of sparks. The crowd rushed *en masse* toward the door of the coach, to offer their hands, their arms, anything, and a stout lady and a priest, with a cotton checked handkerchief tied around his temples, alighted from it. Agonde, more amused than angry, made signs to the musicians and the rocket-throwers to desist from their task.

“He is not coming yet! he is not coming yet!” he shouted. In effect, there were no other passengers in the omnibus. The overseer hastened to explain:

“They are just behind, not two steps off, as one might say. In Count de Vilar’s carriage, in the barouche. On the Señora’s account. The luggage is here. And they paid for the seats as if they had occupied them.”

It was not long before the measured trot of Count de Vilar’s pair of horses was heard and the open carriage, of an old-fashioned style, rolled majestically into the plaza. Reclining on the back seat was a man enveloped, notwithstanding the heat, in a cloth cloak; at his side sat a lady in a gray linen duster, the fanciful brim of her traveling-hat standing out sharply against the pure blue of the sky. In the front seat sat a little girl of some ten years and a *mademoiselle*, a sort of transpyrenean nursery governess. Segundo, who had kept in the background at the arrival of the diligence, this time was less stubborn and the hand which, covered with a long Suède glove, was stretched out in quest of a support, met with the energetic and nervous pressure of another hand. The Minister’s lady looked with surprise at the gallant, gave him a reserved salutation and, taking the arm Agonde offered her, walked quickly into the apothecary’s.

The statesman was slower in alighting. His adherents looked at him with surprise. He had

changed greatly since his last visit to Vilamorta—then in the midst of the revolution—some eight or ten years before. His iron-gray hair, whiter on the temples, heightened the yellow hue of his complexion; the whites of his eyes, too, were yellow and streaked with little red veins; and his furrowed and withered countenance bore unmistakable traces of the anxieties of the struggle for social position, the vicissitudes of the political bench, and the sedentary labors of the forum. His frame hung loosely together, being wanting in the erectness which is the sign of physical vigor. When the handshakings began, however, and the “Delighted to see you——” “At last——” “After an age——” resounded around him, the dying gladiator revived, straightened himself up, and an amiable smile parted his thin lips, lending a pleasing expression to the now stern mouth. He even opened his arms to Genday, who squirmed in them like an eel, and he clapped the Alcalde on the back. García, the lawyer, tried to attract attention to himself, to distinguish himself among the others, saying in the serious tone of one who expresses an opinion in a very delicate matter:

“There, upstairs, upstairs now, to rest and to take some refreshment.”

At last the commotion calmed down, the great

man entering the apothecary's, followed by García, Genday, the Alcalde, and Segundo.

They seated themselves in Agonde's little parlor, respectfully leaving to Don Victoriano the red rep sofa, around which they drew their chairs in a semi-circle. Shortly afterward the ladies made their appearance, and, now without her hat, it could be seen that Señora de Comba was young and beautiful, seeming rather the elder sister than the mother of the little girl. The latter, with her luxuriant hair falling down her back and her precocious womanly seriousness, had the aspect of a sickly plant, while her mother, a smiling blonde, seemed overflowing with health. They spoke of the journey, of the fertile borders of the Avieiro, of the weather, of the road; the conversation was beginning to languish, when Agonde's sister entered opportunely, preceded by the housekeeper of the priest, carrying two enormous trays filled with smoking cups of chocolate, for supper was a meal unknown to the hosts. When the trays were set on the table and the chocolate handed around, the company grew more animated. The Vilamortans, finding a congenial subject on which to exercise their oratorical powers, began to press the strangers, to eulogize the excellence of the viands, and calling Señora de la Comba by her baptismal

name, and adding an affectionate diminutive to that of the little girl, they launched forth into exclamations and questions.

“Is the chocolate to your taste, Nieves?”

“Do you like it thin or thick?”

“Nieves, take that morsel of cake for my sake; you will find it excellent; only we have the secret of making it.”

“Come, Victoriniña, don’t be bashful; that fresh butter goes very well with the hot bread.”

“A morsel of toasted sponge-cake. Ah-ha! You don’t have cake like that in Madrid, eh?”

“No,” answered the girl, in a clear and affected voice. “In Madrid we eat crullers and doughnuts with our chocolate.”

“It is the fashion here to take sponge-cake with it, not crullers. Take that one on the top, that brown one. That’s nothing, a bird could eat it.”

Don Victoriano joined in the conversation, praising the bread, saying he could not eat it, as it had been absolutely prohibited to him, for his malady required that he should abstain from starch and gluten in every form—indeed, he had bread sent him from France, bread prepared *ad hoc* without those elements—and as he spoke, he turned toward Agonde, who nodded with an air of intelligence,

showing that he understood the Latin phrase. And Don Victoriano regretted doubly the prohibition now, for there was no bread to be compared to the Vilamorta bread—which was better of its kind than cake, yes indeed. The Vilamortans smiled, highly flattered, but García, with an eloquent shake of the head, said that the bread was deteriorating, that it was not now what it had formerly been, and that only Pellejo, the baker of the plaza, made it conscientiously, having the patience to select the wheat, grain by grain, not letting a single wormeaten one pass. It was for this reason that his loaves turned out so sweet and substantial. Then a discussion arose as to whether bread should be porous or the contrary, and as to whether hot bread was wholesome.

Don Victoriano, reanimated by these homely details, talked of his childhood, of the slices of bread spread with butter or molasses which he used to eat between meals, and when he added that his uncle, the priest, occasionally administered a sound drubbing to him, a smile once more softened the deep lines of his face. This expansion of feeling gave a sweeter expression to his countenance, effacing from it the traces left by years of strife, the scars of the wounds received in the battle of life, illumi-

nating it with a reflection from his vanished youth. How he longed to see again a grapevine in Las Vides from which he had robbed grapes a hundred times when he was a child.

“And you will rob them again now,” exclaimed Clodio Genday gayly. “We must tell the master of Las Vides to put a guard over the vine of Jaen.”

The jest was received with demonstrations of hilarity, and the girl laughed with her shrill laugh at the idea of her papa robbing a grapevine. Segundo only smiled. His eyes were fixed on Don Victoriano, and he was thinking of what his life had been. He went over in his mind the history of the great man: At Segundo's age Don Victoriano, too, was an obscure lawyer, buried in Vilamorta, eager to break from the shell. He had gone to Madrid, where a celebrated jurisconsult had taken him as his assistant. The jurisconsult was a politician, and Victoriano followed in his footsteps. How did he begin to prosper? This period was shrouded in obscurity. Some said one thing, some another. Vilamorta found him, when it least expected, its candidate and representative. Once in Congress Don Victoriano's importance grew steadily, and when the Revolution of September came it found him in a sufficiently exalted position to be improvised a minister. The brief min-

istry gave him neither time to wear out his popularity nor to give proof of special gifts, and, with his prestige almost intact, the Restoration admitted him as a member of a fusionist cabinet. He had just laid down the portfolio and come to re-establish his shattered health in his native place, where his influence was strong and incontestible, thanks to his alliance with the illustrious house of Mendez de las Vides. Segundo asked himself if a lot like Don Victoriano's would satisfy his aspirations. Don Victoriano had wealth—stocks in banks and shares in railways among whose directors the name of the able jurisconsult figured. Our versifier raised his eyebrows disdainfully and glanced at the Minister's wife; that graceful beauty certainly did not love her lord. She was the daughter of a younger son of the house of Las Vides—a magistrate; she had probably married her husband, allured by his position. No; most assuredly the poet did not envy the politician. Why had this man risen to the eminent position he occupied? What extraordinary gifts did he possess? A diffuse parliamentary orator, a passive minister, with some forensic ability—sum total, a mediocrity.

While these reflections were passing through Segundo's mind, Señora de Comba amused herself by examining minutely the dress and the appear-

ance of everyone present. She took in every detail, under her half-closed lids, of the toilet of Carmen Agonde, who was arrayed in a tight-fitting deep blue bodice that sent the blood to her plethoric cheeks. She next lowered her mocking glance to the patent-leather boots of the pharmacist, and then raised them again to Clodio Genday's fingers, stained by the cigar, and the purple and white checked velvet waist-coat of the lawyer García. Finally, her glance fell on Segundo, in critical examination of his attire. But another glance, steady and ardent, cast it back like a shield.

V.

AGONDE rose early on the following morning, and descended shortly afterward to his shop, leaving his guests wrapped in their slumbers, and Carmen charged, the moment they should stir, to pour the chocolate into their mouths. The apothecary desired to enjoy the effect produced in the town by Don Victoriano's sojourn in his house. He was reclining in his leather-covered easy-chair when he saw Tropiczo riding past on his gray mule, and called out to him:

"Hello! Hello! Where are you bound for so early?"

"For Doas, man. I have not a minute to spare." And saying this the doctor alighted from his mule, which he tied to an iron ring fastened in the wall.

"Is the case so urgent?"

"Urgent? That it is. The old woman, the grandmother of Ramon, the confectioner. It appears she has already received the last sacrament."

"And it is only now they have sent for you?"

"No; I went to see her yesterday, and I applied

two dozen leeches, that drew their fill of blood from her. She looked like a dying kid; she was very weak, and as thin as a wafer. Perhaps if I had given her something that I thought of, instead of applying leeches——”

“Ah! a trip,” interrupted Agonde maliciously.

“Life is a series of trips,” responded the doctor, shrugging his shoulders. “And upstairs?” he added, raising his eyes interrogatively to the ceiling.

“Snoring like princes.”

“And he—how does he look?” asked Don Fermin, lowering his voice and dwelling on every word.

“He?” repeated Agonde, following his example. “So-so. Oldish. And very gray.”

“But what is the matter with him? Let us hear. For as to being sick, he is that.”

“He has—a new disease—a very strange one, one of the latest fashion.” And Agonde smiled maliciously.

“New?”

Agonde half-closed his eyes, bent toward Tropiezo, and whispered something in his ear.

Tropiezo burst into a laugh; suddenly he looked very serious, and tapping his nose repeatedly with his forefinger:

“I know, I know,” he said emphatically. “And the

waters here, and some others in France, are the only cure for that disease. If he drinks a few glasses from the spring, he will be himself again."

Tropiezo emitted his dictamen leaning on the counter, forgetful of the mule that was stamping impatiently at the door.

"And the Señora—what does she say of her husband's state of health?" he suddenly asked, with a wink.

"What should she say of it, man? Probably she does not know that it is serious."

A look of derision lighted up the inexpressive features of the physician; he glanced at Agonde and smothering another burst of laughter, began:

"The Señora——"

"Chut!" interrupted the apothecary furiously. The whole Comba family were making an irruption into the shop through the small door of the porch. Mother and daughter formed a charming group, both wearing wide-brimmed hats of coarse straw adorned with enormous bows of flame-colored bunting. Their écru cotton gowns embroidered with red braid completed the rustic character of their costumes, reminding one of a bunch of poppies and straw. The girl's luxuriant dark hair hung loose over her shoulders, and the fair locks of the mother curled

in a tangled mass under the shade of her broad-brimmed hat. Nieves did not wear gloves nor was there visible on her face a trace of powder, or of any other of the cosmetics whose use is imputed unjustly by the women of the provinces to the Madridliens; on the contrary, her rosy ears and neck showed signs of energetic friction with the towel and cold water. As for Don Victoriano, the ravages made in his countenance by care and sickness were still more

• apparent in the morning light; it was not, as Agonde had said, age that was visible there; it was virility, but tortured, exhausted, wounded to death.

“Why! Have you had chocolate already?” asked Agonde, in confusion.

“No, friend Saturnino, nor shall we take it, with your permission, until we return. Don’t trouble yourself on our account. Victoriniña has ransacked your pantry—your closets——”

The child half opened a handkerchief which she held by the four corners, disclosing a provision of bread, cake, and the cheese of the country.

“At least let me bring you a whole cheese. I will go see if there is not some fresh bread, just out of the oven——”

Don Victoriano objected—let him not be deprived of the pleasure of going to breakfast in the poplar-

grove near the spring, just as he had done when a boy. Agonde remarked that those articles of food were not wholesome for him, to which Tropiczo, scratching the tip of his ear, responded sceptically:

“Bah! bah! bah! Those are new-fangled notions. What is wholesome for the body—can’t they understand that—is what the body craves. If the gentleman likes bread—and for your malady, Señor Don Victoriano, there is nothing like the waters here. I don’t know why people go to give their money to those French when we have better things at home than any they can give us.”

The Minister looked at Tropiczo with keen interest depicted on his countenance. He called to mind his last visit to Sanchez del Abrojo and the contraction of the lips with which the learned practitioner had said to him:

“I would send you to Carlsbad or to Vichy, but those waters are not always beneficial. At times they hasten the natural course of a disease. Rest for a time, and diet yourself—we will see how you are when you return in the autumn.” And what a look Sanchez del Abrojo put on when he said this! An impenetrable, sphinx-like expression. The positive assertion of Tropiczo awoke tumultuous hopes in Don Victoriano’s breast. This village practitioner

must know a great deal from experience, more perhaps than the pompous doctors of the capital.

“Come, papa,” said the child impatiently, pulling him by the sleeve.

They took the path toward the grove. Vilamorta, naturally given to early rising, was more full of activity at this hour than in the afternoon. The shops were open, the baskets of the fruit-venders were already filled with fruit. Cansin walked up and down his establishment with his hands in his pockets, affecting to have noticed nothing, so as not to be obliged to bid good-morning to Agonde and acknowledge his triumph. Pellejo, covered with flour, was haggling with three shopkeepers from Cebre, who wanted to buy some of his best wheat. Ramon, the confectioner, was dividing chocolate into squares on a large board placed on the counter and rapidly stamping them with a hot iron before they should have time to cool.

The morning was cloudless and the sun was already unusually hot. The party, augmented by García and Genday, walked through orchards and cornfields until they reached the entrance to the walk. Don Victoriano uttered an exclamation of joy. It was the same double row of elms bordering the river, the foaming and joyous Avieiro, that ran

on sparkling in gentle cascades, washing with a pleasant murmur the rocks, worn smooth by the action of the current. He recognized the thick osier plantations; he remembered all his longings of the day before and leaned, full of emotion, on the parapet of the walk. The scene was almost deserted; half a dozen melancholy and bilious-looking individuals, visitors to the springs, were walking slowly up and down, discussing their ailments in low tones, and eructating the bicarbonate of the waters. Nieves, leaning back on a stone bench, gazed at the river. The child touched her on the shoulder, saying:

“Mamma, the young man we saw yesterday.”

On the opposite bank Segundo García was standing on a rock, absorbed in meditation, his straw hat pushed far back on his head, his hand resting on his hip, doubtless with the purpose of preserving his equilibrium in so dangerous a position. Nieves reproved the little girl, saying:

“Don’t be silly, child. You startled me. Salute the gentleman.”

“He is not looking this way. Ah! now he is looking. Salute him, you, mamma. He is taking off his hat, he is going to fall! There! now he is safe.”

Don Victoriano descended the stone steps leading to the spring. The abode of the naiad was a humble

grotto—a shed supported on rough posts, a small basin overflowing with the water from the spring, some wretched hovels for the bathers, and a strong and sickening odor of rotten eggs, caused by the stagnation of the sulphur water, were all that the fastidious tourist found there. Notwithstanding this, Don Victoriano's soul was filled with the purest joy. In this naiad he beheld his youth, his lost youth—the age of illusions, of hopes blooming as the banks of the Avieiro. How many mornings had he come to drink from the fountain, for a jest, to wash his face with the water, which enjoyed throughout the country the reputation of possessing extraordinary curative virtue for the eyes. Don Victoriano stretched out his hands, plunged them into the warm current, feeling it slip through his fingers with delight, and playing with it and caressing it as one caresses a loved being. But the undulating form of the naiad escaped from him as youth escapes from us—without the possibility of detaining it. Then the ex-Minister felt a thirst awaken in him to drink the waters. Beside him on the edge of the basin was a glass; and the keeper, a poor old man in his dotage, presented it to him with an idiotic smile. Don Victoriano drank, closing his eyes, with indescribable pleasure, enjoying the mysterious water,

charmed by the magic arts of memory. When he had drained the glass he drew himself up and ascended the stairs with a firm and elastic step. Victoriniña, who was breakfasting on bread and cheese in the avenue, was astonished when her father took a piece of bread from her lap, saying gayly :

“We are all God’s creatures.”

VI.

ALMOST as much as by Don Victoriano's arrival was Vilamorta excited by the arrival of Señor de las Vides, accompanied by his steward, Primo Genday. This event happened on the afternoon of the memorable day on which Don Victoriano had infringed the commands of science by eating half a pound of fresh bread. At three o'clock, under a blazing sun, Genday the elder and Mendez entered the plaza, the latter mounted on a powerful mule, the former on an ordinary nag.

Señor de las Vides was a little old man as dry as a vine branch. His carefully shaven cheeks, his thin lips and aristocratically pointed nose and chin, his shrewd, kind eyes, surrounded by innumerable crows' feet, his intellectual profile, his beardless face, called loudly for the curled wig, the embroidered coat and the gold snuff-box of the Campomanes and Arandas. With his delicate and expressive countenance the countenance of Primo Genday contrasted strongly. The steward's complexion was white and red, he had the fine and transparent skin, showing the full veins

underneath, of those who are predisposed to hemiplegy. His eyes were of a greenish color, one of them being attached, as it were, to the lax and drooping lid, while the other rolled around with mischievous vivacity. His silvery curls gave him a distant resemblance to Louis Philippe, as he is represented on the coins which bear his effigy.

By a combination not unusual in small towns Primo Genday and his brother Clodio served under opposite political banners, both being in reality of one mind and both pursuing the same end; Clodio ranged himself on the side of the radicals, Primo was the support of the Carlist party, and in cases of emergency, in the electoral contests, they clasped hands over the fence. When the hoofs of Primo Genday's nag resounded on the paving-stones, the windows of the reactionary shop were opened and two or three hands were waved in friendly welcome. Primo paused, and Mendez continued on his way to Agonde's door, where he dismounted.

He was received in Don Victoriano's arms, and then disappeared among the shadows of the staircase. The mule remained fastened to the ring, stamping impatiently, while the onlookers on the plaza contemplated with respect the nobleman's old-fashioned harness of embossed leather, ornamented

with silver, bright with use. One after another other mules and horses were brought to join the first comer. And the crowd assigned them their riders with considerable judgment. The chestnut nag of the alguazil, a fine animal, with a saddle and a silk headstall, was no doubt for the Minister. The black donkey with the side-saddle—who could doubt that it was for the Señora? The other gentle white donkey they would give to the little girl. The Alcalde's ass was for the maid. Agonde would ride the mare he always rode, the Morena, that had more malanders on her head than hairs in her tail. During this time the radicals, García, Clodio, Genday, and Ramon, were discussing the respective merits of the animals and the condition of their trappings and calculating the probabilities of their being able to reach Las Vides before nightfall. The lawyer shook his head, saying emphatically and sententiously:

“They are taking their time about it if they expect to do that.”

“And they are bringing the alguazil's horse for Don Victoriano!” exclaimed the tobacconist. “Tricky as the very devil! There will be a scene. When you rode him, Segundo, did he play you no trick?”

“Me, no. But he is lively.”

“You shall see, you shall see.”

The travelers were now coming out of the house, and the cavalcade began to form. The ladies seated themselves in their side-saddles and the men settled their feet in their stirrups. Then the scene predicted by the tobacconist took place, to the great scandal and the further delay of the party. As soon as the alguazil's nag became aware of the presence of a female of his race he began to snuff the air excitedly, neighing fiercely. Don Victoriano gathered up the reins, but, before the animal had felt the iron in his mouth, he became so unmanageable, first rearing, then kicking violently, and finally turning his head around to try to bite his rider's legs, that Don Victoriano, somewhat pale, thought it prudent to dismount. Agonde, furious, dismounted also.

“What an infernal animal!” he cried. “Here, brutes—who told you to bring the alguazil's horse? One would suppose you didn't know it was a wild beast. You—Alcalde, or you, García—quick, go for Requinto's mule; it is only two steps from here. Señor Don Victoriano, take my mule. And that tiger, to the stable with him!”

“No,” interrupted Segundo, “I will ride him as he

is already saddled. I will go with you as far as the cross."

And Segundo, providing himself with a strong switch, caught the nag by the mane and at a bound was in the saddle. Instead of leaning his weight on the stirrup he pressed the animal's sides between his legs, raining a shower of blows at the same time on his head. The animal, which was already beginning to curvet and prance again, gave a snort of pain, and now, quivering and subdued, obeyed his rider's touch. The cavalcade put itself in motion as soon as Requinto's mule was brought, after handshakings, waving of hats, and even a timid *viva*, from what quarter no one knew. The cortége proceeded along the highway, the mare and the mules heading the procession, the donkeys following behind, and at their side the nag, kept in order by dint of switching. The sun was sinking in the west, turning the dust of the road into gold; the chestnut trees cast lengthened shadows on the ground, and from the osier-brake came a pleasant breeze laden with moisture from the river.

Segundo rode along in silence; Victoriniña, delighted to be riding on a donkey, smiled, making fruitless efforts to hide with her frock her sharp knee-bones, which the shape of the saddle compelled

her to raise and uncover. Nieves, leaning back in her saddle, opened her rose-lined écru lace parasol, and, as they started, drew from her bosom a diminutive watch, which she consulted for the hour. A few moments of embarrassed silence followed. At last Segundo felt that it was necessary to say something:

“How are you doing, Victoriniña?” he said to the child. “Are you comfortable?”

“Yes, quite comfortable.”

“I warrant you would rather ride on my horse. If you are not afraid I will take you before me.”

The girl, whose embarrassment had now reached its height, lowered her eyes without answering; her mother, smiling graciously, however, now joined in the conversation.

“And tell me, García, why don't you address the child as *thou*? You treat her with so much ceremony! You will make her fancy she is a young lady already.”

“I should not dare to do so without her permission.”

“Come, Victoriniña, tell this gentleman he has your permission.”

The child took refuge in that invincible muteness of growing girls whom an exquisite and precocious

sensibility renders painfully shy. A smile parted her lips, and at the same time her eyes filled with tears. Mademoiselle said something gently to her in French; meanwhile Nieves and Segundo, laughing confidentially at the incident, found the way smoothed for them to begin a conversation.

"When do you think we shall arrive at Las Vides? Is it a pretty place? Shall we be comfortable there? How will it agree with Victoriano? What sort of a life shall we lead? Shall we have many visitors? Is there a garden?"

"Las Vides is a beautiful place," said Segundo. "It has an air of antiquity—a lordly air, as it were. I like the escutcheon, and a magnificent grapevine that covers the courtyard, and the camellias and lemon trees in the orchards, that look like good-sized chestnut trees, and the view of the river, and, above all, a pine grove that talks and even sings—don't laugh—that sings; yes, Señora, and better than most professional singers. Don't you believe it? Well, you shall see for yourself presently."

Nieves looked with lively curiosity at the young man and then hastily turned her glance aside, remembering the quick and nervous hand-pressure of the day before, when she was alighting from the carriage. For the second time in the space of a few

hours this young man had surprised her. Nieves led an extremely regular life in Madrid—the life of the middle classes, in which all the incidents are commonplace. She went to mass and shopped in the morning; in the afternoon she went to the Retiro, or made visits; in the evening she went to her parents' house or to the theater with her husband; on rare occasions to some ball or banquet at the house of the Duke of Puenteanchas, a client of Don Victoriano's. When the latter received the portfolio it made little change in Nieves' way of life. She received a few more salutations than before in the Retiro; the clerks in the shops were more attentive to her; the Duchess of Puenteanchas said some flattering things to her, calling her "pet," and here ended for Nieves the pleasure of the ministry. The trip to Vilamorta, the picturesque country of which she had so often heard her father speak, was a novel incident in her monotonous life. Segundo seemed to her a curious detail of the journey. He looked at her and spoke to her in so odd a way. Bah, fancies! Between this young man and herself there was nothing in common. A passing acquaintance, like so many others to be met here at every step. So the pines sang, did they? A misfortune for Gayarre! And Nieves smiled graciously, dissembling her

strange thoughts and went on asking questions, to which Segundo responded in expressive phrases. Night was beginning to fall. Suddenly, the cavalcade, leaving the highroad, turned into a path that led among pine groves and woods. At a turn of the path could be seen the picturesque dark stone cross, whose steps invited to prayer or to sentimental reverie. Agonde stopped here and took his leave of the party, and Segundo followed his example.

As the tinkling of the donkeys' bells grew fainter in the distance Segundo felt an inexplicable sensation of loneliness and abandonment steal over him, as if he had just parted forever from persons who were dear to him or who played an important part in his life. "A pretty fool I am!" said the poet to himself. "What have I to do with these people or they with me? Nieves has invited me to spend a few days at Las Vides, *en famille*. When Nieves returns to Madrid this winter she will speak of me as 'That lawyer's son, that we met at Vilamorta.' Who am I? What position should I occupy in her house? An altogether secondary one. That of a boy who is treated with consideration because his father disposes of votes."

While Segundo was thus caviling, the apothecary overtook him, and horse and mule pursued their way

side by side. In the twilight the poet could distinguish the placid smile of Agonde, his red cheeks, looking redder in contrast to the lustrous black mustache, his expression of sensual amiability and epicurean beatitude. An enviable lot was the apothecary's. This man was happy in his comfortable and well-ordered shop, with his circle of friends, his cap and his embroidered slippers, taking life as one takes a glass of cordial, sipping it with enjoyment, in peace and harmony, along with the other guests at the banquet of life. Why should not Segundo be satisfied with what satisfied Agonde perfectly? Whence came this longing for something that was not precisely money, nor pleasure, nor fame, nor love—which partook of all these, which embraced them all and which perhaps nothing would satisfy?

“Segundo.”

“Eh?” he answered, turning his head toward Agonde.

“How silent you are, my boy! What do you think of the Minister?”

“What would you have me think of him?”

“And the Señora? Come, you have noticed her, I warrant. She wears black silk stockings, like the priests. When she was mounting the donkey——”

“I am going to take a gallop as far as Vilamorta. Do you care to join me, Saturnino?”

“Gallop with this mule? I should arrive there with my stomach in my mouth. Gallop you, if you have a fancy for doing so.”

The nag galloped for half a league or so, urged by his rider's whip. As they drew near the canebrake by the river, Segundo slackened his horse's gallop to a very slow walk. It was now almost dark and the cool mists rose, moist and clinging, from the bosom of the Avieiro. Segundo remembered that it was two or three days since he had put his foot in Leocadia's house. No doubt the schoolmistress was now fretting herself to death, weeping and watching for him. This thought brought sudden balm to Segundo's wounded spirit. How tenderly Leocadia loved him! With what joy did she welcome him! How deeply his poetry, his words, moved her! And he—why was it that he did not share her ardor? Of this exclusive, this absolute, boundless love, Segundo had never deigned to accept even the half; and of all the tender terms of endearment invented by the muse he chose for Leocadia the least poetical, the least romantic; as we separate the gold and silver in our purse from the baser coin, setting aside for the beggar the meanest copper, so did Segundo

dispense with niggard hand the treasures of his love. A hundred times had it happened to him, in his walks through the country, to fill his hat with violets, with hyacinths and branches of blackberry blossoms, only to throw them all into the river on reaching the village, in order not to carry them to Leocadia.

VII.

WHILE she distributed their tasks among the children, saying to one, "Take care to make this hem straight," to another, "Make this seam even, the stitch smaller," to a third, "Use your handkerchief instead of your dress," and to still another, "Sit still, child, don't move your feet," Leocadia cast a glance from time to time toward the plaza in the hope of seeing Segundo pass by. But no Segundo was to be seen. The flies settled themselves to sleep, buzzing, on the ceiling; the heat abated; the afternoon came, and the children went away. Leocadia felt a profound sadness take possession of her and, without waiting to put the house in order, she went to her room and threw herself on the bed.

The glass door was pushed gently open, and some one entered softly.

"Mamma," said the intruder, in a low voice.

The schoolmistress did not answer.

"Mamma, mamma," repeated the hunchback, in a louder voice. "Mamma!" he shouted at last.

"Is that you? What do you want?"

"Are you ill?"

"No, child."

"As you went to bed——"

"I have a slight headache. There, leave me in peace."

Minguitos turned round and walked in silence toward the door. As her eyes fell on the protuberance of his back, a sharp pang pierced the heart of the schoolmistress. How many tears that hump had cost her in other days. She raised herself on her elbow.

"Minguitos!" she called.

"What is it, mamma?"

"Don't go away. How do you feel to-day? Have you any pain?"

"I feel pretty well, mamma. Only my chest hurts me."

"Let me see; come here."

Leocadia sat up in the bed and, taking the child's head between her hands, looked at him with a mother's hungry look. Minguitos' face was long and of a melancholy cast; the prominent lower jaw was in keeping with the twisted and misshapen body that reminded one of a building shaken out of shape by an earthquake or a tree twisted by a hurricane. Minguitos' deformity was not congenital. He had

always been sickly, indeed, and it had always been remarked that his head seemed too heavy for his body, and that his legs seemed too frail to support him. Leocadia recalled one by one the incidents of his childhood. At five years old the boy had met with an accident—a fall down the stairs; from that day he lost all his liveliness; he walked little and never ran. He contracted a habit of sitting Turkish fashion, playing marbles for hours at a time. If he rose his legs soon warned him to sit down again. When he stood, his movements were vacillating and awkward. When he was quiet he felt no pain, but when he turned any part of his body, he experienced slight pains in the spinal column. The trouble increased with time; the boy complained of a feeling as if an iron band were compressing his chest. Then his mother, now thoroughly alarmed, consulted a famous physician, the best in Orense. He prescribed frictions with iodine, large doses of phosphates of lime, and sea-bathing. Leocadia hastened with the boy to a little sea-port. After taking two or three baths, the trouble increased; he could not bend his body; his spinal column was rigid and it was only when he was in a horizontal position that he felt any relief from his now severe pains. Sores appeared on his skin, and one morning when Leo-

cadia begged him with tears to straighten himself, and tried to lift him up by the arms, he uttered a horrible cry.

"I am broken in two, mamma—I am broken in two," he repeated with anguish, while his mother, with trembling fingers sought to find what had caused his cry.

It was true! The backbone had bent outward, forming an angle on a level with his shoulderblades, the softened vertebræ had sunk and *cifosis*, the hump, the indelible mark of irremediable calamity, was to deform henceforth this child who was dearer to her than her life. The schoolmistress had had a moment of animal and sublime anguish, the anguish of the wild beast that sees its young mutilated. She had uttered shriek after shriek, cursing the doctor, cursing herself, tearing her hair and digging her nails into her flesh. Afterward tears had come and she had showered kisses, delirious, but soothing and sweet, on the boy, and her grief took a resigned form. During nine years Leocadia had had no other thought than to watch over her little cripple by night and by day, sheltering him in her love, amusing with ingenious inventions the idle hours of his sedentary childhood. A thousand incidents of this time recurred to Leocadia's memory. The boy suffered

from obstinate dyspnœa, due to the pressure of the sunken vertebræ on the respiratory organs, and his mother would get up in the middle of the night and go in her bare feet to listen to his breathing and to raise his pillows. As these recollections came to her mind Leocadia felt her heart melt and something stir within her like the remains of a great love, the warm ashes of an immense fire, and she experienced the unconscious reaction of maternity, the irresistible impulse which makes a mother see in her grown-up son only the infant she has nursed and protected, to whom she would have given her blood, if it had been necessary, instead of milk. And uttering a cry of love, pressing her feverish lips passionately to the pallid temples of the hunchback, she said, falling back naturally into the caressing expressions of the dialect:

"Malpocadiño. Who loves you? say, who loves you dearly? Who?"

"You don't love me, mamma. You don't love me," the boy returned, half-smiling, leaning his head with delight on the bosom that had sheltered his sad childhood. The mother, meantime, wildly kissed his hair, his neck, his eyes—as if to make up for lost time—lavishing upon him the honeyed words with which infants are beguiled, words profaned in hours

of passion, which overflowed in the pure channel of maternal love.

“My treasure—my king—my glory.”

At last the hunchback felt a tear fall on his cheek. Delicious assuagement! At first, the tears were large and round, scorching almost, but soon they came in a gentle shower and then ceased altogether, and there remained where they had fallen only a grateful sense of coolness. Passionate phrases rushed simultaneously from the lips of mother and son.

“Do you love me dearly, dearly, dearly? As much as your whole life?”

“As much, my life, my treasure.”

“Will you always love me?”

“Always, always, my joy.”

“Will you do something to please me, mamma? I want to ask you——”

“What?”

“A favor. Don’t turn your face away!”

The hunchback observed that his mother’s form suddenly grew stiff and rigid as a bar of iron. He no longer felt the sweet warmth of her moist eyelids, and the gentle contact of her wet lashes on his cheek. In a voice that had a metallic sound Leocadia asked her son ;

"And what is the favor you want? Let me hear it."

Minguitos murmured without bitterness, with resignation:

"Nothing, mamma, nothing. I was only in jest."

"But what was the favor you were going to ask me?"

"Nothing, nothing, indeed."

"No, you wanted to ask something," persisted the schoolmistress, seizing the pretext to give vent to her anger. "Otherwise you are very deceitful and very sly. You keep everything hidden in your breast. Those are the lessons Flores teaches you; do you think I don't notice it?"

Saying this, she pushed the boy away from her, and sprang from the bed. In the hall outside almost at the same moment was heard a firm and youthful step. Leocadia trembled, and turning to Minguitos, stammered:

"Go, go to Flores. Leave me alone. I do not feel well, and you make me worse."

Segundo's brow was clouded, and as soon as the joy of seeing him had subsided Leocadia was seized with the desire to restore him to good humor. She waited patiently for a fitting opportunity, however,

and when this came, throwing her arms around his neck, she began with the complaint: Where had he kept himself? Why had he stayed away so long? The poet unburdened himself of his grievances. It was intolerable to follow in the train of a great man. And allowing himself to be carried away by the pleasure of speaking of what occupied his mind he decried Don Victoriano and the radicals, he satirized Agonde's reception of his guests, his manner of entertaining them, spoke of the hopes he founded in the protection of the ex-Minister, giving them as a reason for the necessity of paying court to Don Victoriano. Leocadia fixed her dog-like look on Segundo's countenance.

"And the Señora and the girl—what are they like?"

Segundo half-closed his eyes the better to contemplate an attractive and charming image that presented itself to his mental vision, and to reflect that in the existence of Nieves he played no part whatsoever, it being manifest folly for him to think of Señora de Comba, who did not think of him. This reflection, natural and simple enough, aroused his anger. There was awakened within him a keen longing for the unattainable, that insensate and unbridled desire with which the likeness of a beautiful

woman dead for centuries may inspire some dreamer in a museum.

“But answer me—are those ladies handsome?” the schoolmistress asked again.

“The mother, yes”—answered Segundo, speaking with the careless frankness of one who is secure of his auditor. “Her hair is fair, and her eyes are blue—a light blue that makes one think of the verses of Becquer.” And he began to recite:

“‘Tu pupila es azul, y cuando ries
Su claridad suave me recuerda——’”

Leocadia listened to him at first with eyes cast down; afterward with her face turned away from him. When he had finished the poem she said in an altered voice, with feigned calmness.

“They will invite you to go there.”

“Where?”

“To Las Vides, of course. I hear they intend to have a great deal of company.”

“Yes; they have given me a pressing invitation, but I shall not go. Uncle Clodio insists upon it that I ought to cultivate the friendship of Don Victoriano so that he may be of use to me in Madrid and help me to get a position there. But, child, to go and

play a sorry part is not to my liking. This suit is the best I have, and it is in last year's fashion. If they play tresillo or give tips to the servants—and it is impossible to make my father understand this—and I shall not try to do so; God forbid. So that they shall not catch a sight of me in Las Vides.”

When she heard what his intentions were, Leocadia's countenance cleared up, and rising, radiant with happiness, she ran to the kitchen. Flores was washing plates and cups and saucers by the light of a lamp, knocking them angrily together and rubbing savagely.

“The coffee-pot—did you clean it?”

“Presently, presently,” responded the old woman. “Anyone would think that one was made of wood, that one is never to get tired—that one can do things flying.”

“Give it to me, I will clean it. Put more wood on the fire; it is going out and the beefsteak will be spoiled.” And so saying Leocadia washed the coffee-pot, cleaning the filter with a knitting-needle, and put some fresh water down to boil in a new saucepan, throwing more wood on the fire.

“Yes, heap on wood,” growled Flores, “as we get it for nothing!”

Leocadia, who was slicing some potatoes for the

beefsteak, paid no attention to her. When she had cut up as many as she judged necessary, she washed her hands hastily in the jar of the drain, full of dirty water, on whose surface floated large patches of grease. She then hurried to the parlor where Segundo was waiting for her, and soon afterward Flores brought in the supper, which they ate, seated at a small side-table. By the time they had got to the coffee Segundo began to be more communicative. This coffee was what Leocadia most prided herself on. She had bought a set of English china, an imitation lacquer-box, a *vermeil* sugar-tongs and two small silver spoons, and she always placed on the table with the coffee a liquor-stand, supplied with cumin, rum, and anisette. At the third glass of cumin, seeing the poet amiable and propitious, Leocadia put her arm around his neck. He drew back brusquely, noticing with strong repulsion the odor of cooking and of parsley with which the garments of the schoolmistress were impregnated.

At this moment precisely Minguitos, after letting his shoes drop on the floor, was drawing the coverlet around him with a sigh. Flores, seated on a low chair, began to recite the rosary. The sick child required, to put him to sleep, the monotonous murmur of the husky voice which had lulled him to rest,

ever since his mother had ceased to keep him company at bedtime. The Ave Marias and Gloria Patris, mumbled rather than pronounced, little by little dulled thought and, by the time the litany was reached, sleep had stolen over him, and, half-unconscious, it was with difficulty he made the responses to the barbarous phrases of the old woman: "Juana celi — Ora pro nobis — Sal-es-enfermorun — nobis — Refajos pecadorum — bis — Consolate flitorum — sss——"

The only response was the labored, restless, uneven breathing that came through the sleeping boy's half-closed lips. Flores softly put out the tallow candle, took off her shoes, in order to make no noise, and stole out gently, feeling her way along the dining-room wall. From the moment in which Minguitos fell asleep there was no more rattling of dishes in the kitchen.

VIII.

IT was late before the Swan blew out the tallow candle which Aunt Gáspara placed every day, always with much grumbling, in his brass candlestick. Seated at the little table littered with books, he had before him a sheet of paper half covered with lines of unequal length, variegated with blots and corrections, little heaps of sand, and here and there a flourish. Segundo would not have slept all night if he had not first written down the poem which, from the moment he had left the cross, had been running through his brain. Only that, before taking up the pen, he seemed to have the poem already composed in his head, so that all he had to do was to turn the spigot and it would flow out in a stream, and when he took the pen in his hand the verses, instead of rushing forth, hid themselves or vanished. A few strophes fell on the paper, rounded, fluent, finished, with harmonious and opportune rhymes, with a certain sweetness and sonorousness extremely delightful to the author himself, who scribbled them down hastily before they should take flight. Of

others, however, only the first two lines occurred to him, and, perhaps, the fourth—this last rounded, effective; but the third line was wanting and he must hunt for it, fill up the space, graft on the syllables to eke out the meter. The poet paused and looked up at the ceiling, biting the ends of his mustache, and then the idle pen traced, obeying the mechanical impulse of the hand, a cocked hat, a comet, or some other equally irrelevant design. Sometimes after rejecting seven or eight rhymes he would content himself with the ninth, which was neither better nor worse than the others. When a superfluous syllable would cause a line to halt, he must look for another adverb, another adjective. And the accents! If the poet could only enjoy the privilege, of saying, *eternél*, for instance, instead of *etérnel*, it would be so easy to write verses!

Confounded technical difficulties! The divine fire of inspiration glowed and burned in Segundo's mind, but as soon as he tried to transfer it to the paper, to give expression to what he felt—to condense, in words, a world of dreams, a psychic nebula—his mind became a blank. To unite the form with the idea, to imprison feeling in the golden links of rhyme! Ah, what a light and flowery chain in appearance, and how hard to weave in reality! How

deceptive the natural grace, the facile harmony of the master! How easy it seems to express simple, familiar images, to utter the chimeras of the imagination and the heart in easy and flowing meter, and yet how impossible it is, for him who is not called Becquer, to give his verse those palpitating, diaphanous, azure wings on which the Becquerian butterfly soars!

While the Swan continues his task of effacing and correcting, Leocadia is in her bedroom, preparing to retire. On other nights she went to her room with a smile on her lips, her face glowing, her eyes humid and half-closed, with deep circles under them, her hair in disorder. And on those nights she was in no hurry to retire; she would busy herself arranging the articles on her bureau, she would even look at herself in the glass of her cheap toilet table. To-night her lips were dry, her cheeks pale, she went at once to bed, loosened her clothing, and let it fall on the floor, put out the light and buried her face in the cool, thick cotton sheets. She did not wish to think, all she wished was to forget and to sleep. She tried to lie still. A thousand needles seemed to pierce her flesh; she turned around, in search of a cool spot, then turned again in search of another, and presently she threw off the sheets. She felt a horrible rest-

lessness, a savor of bitterness in her mouth. In the silence of the night she could hear the tumultuous beating of her heart; if she lay on her left side its noise almost deafened her. She tried to fix her thoughts on indifferent subjects, and repeated to herself with monotonous and persistent regularity—"To-morrow is Sunday, the children will not come." In vain; her brain boiled, her blood burned as before. Leocadia was jealous.

Measureless, nameless torture! Hitherto the poor schoolmistress had not known the accompaniment of love, jealousy, whose barbed sting pierces the soul, whose consuming fire dries up the blood, whose chill freezes the heart, whose restless anguish makes the nerves quiver. Segundo scarcely noticed the young girls of Vilamorta; as for the peasant girls, they did not exist for him, he did not even regard them as women; so that Leocadia had attributed the poet's hours of coldness to the bad offices of the muses. But now! She recalled the poem, "A los ojos azules," and his manner of reciting it. Those honeyed verses were to her gall and wormwood. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she broke into convulsive sobs which shook her frame and made the bedstead creak and the cornhusks of the mattress rustle. Still her overwrought brain did not suspend its

activity. There was not a doubt but that Segundo was in love with Señora de Comba; but she was a married woman. Bah! in Madrid and in novels all the married women have lovers. And then, who could resist Segundo, a poet who was the rival of Becquer, who was young, handsome, ardent, when he wished to be so?

What could Leocadia do to avert this great calamity? Was it not better to resign herself to it? Ah, resignation, that is easily said! Why had God denied her the power to express her feelings? Why had she not knelt before Segundo, begging him for a little love, describing to him and communicating to him the flame that consumed the marrow of her bones? Why had she remained mute when she had so many things to say? Segundo would not go to Las Vides; so much the better. He had no money; better still. He would accept no position, he would not leave Vilamorta, better and better. But what did it matter if after all Segundo did not love her; if he had turned away from her with a gesture which she could still see in the darkness, or rather in the lurid light of jealousy.

How warm the night was! How restless she felt! She got out of bed and threw herself on the floor, thinking to find some relief in the coolness of the

boards. Instead of feeling any alleviation she was seized with a fit of trembling. A lump seemed to rise in her throat that prevented her from breathing. She made an effort to stand up but found that she was not able; she felt a hysterical attack coming on, but she tried to restrain her cries, her sobs, her contortions, in order not to awaken Flores. For a time she succeeded; but at last the nervous crisis conquered; her rigid limbs writhed, she dug her nails into her throat, she rolled about and beat her temples against the floor. Then a cold perspiration broke out over her body, and for a moment she lost consciousness. When she returned to herself she was calm but exhausted. She rose to her feet, went back to bed, drew the clothing over her and sank into a sort of stupor, in which there was neither thought nor feeling. The beneficent sleep of early morning had wrapped her senses in oblivion.

She woke late, unrested, exhausted, and, as it were, stupefied. She could scarcely manage to dress herself; it seemed to her as if a year had passed since the night before, and as for her jealous rage, her projects of resistance—how could she have thought of such things? All that mattered to her, all she desired, was that Segundo should be happy, that he should achieve his high destiny, that he

should be famous. The rest was madness, a convulsion, an attack of the nerves to which she had given way, overcome by the sense of her loneliness.

The schoolmistress opened the bureau-drawer in which she kept her savings and the money for the household expenses. Beside a pile of stockings was a slim and flabby purse. A short time ago it had contained a few thousand reals, all she possessed in money. Scarcely thirty dollars remained, and out of these she must pay Cansin for a black merino dress, the confectioner for liqueurs, and some friends at Orense for purchases made on her account. And she would not receive her little income until November. A brilliant prospect truly!

After a moment of anguish caused by the struggle between her economical principles and her resolution, Leocadia washed her face, smoothed her hair, put on her dress and her silk manto and left the house. Being Sunday, the streets were full of people, and the cracked bell of the chapel kept up an incessant ringing. The plaza was full of bustle and animation. Before Doña Eufrosia's door, three or four mules, whose clerical riders were in the shop, were impatiently trying to protect themselves from the persistent attacks of the flies and hornets, shaking

their heads, stamping their hoofs, and switching their flanks with their rough tails. And the fruit-venders, too, in the intervals between selling their wares and chatting and laughing with one another, were watchful to chase away the troublesome insects that settled on the cherries and tomatoes wherever the skin was broken, leaving uncovered the sweet pulp or the red flesh. But the grand conclave of the flies was held in the confectionery of Ramon. It was nauseating to see the insects buzzing blindly in the hot atmosphere, entangling their legs in the caramels, and then making desperate efforts to free themselves from their sweet captivity. A swarm of flies were buzzing around a méringue pie which adorned the center of the shelf, and Ramon having grown tired of defending it against their attacks, the invading army rifled it at their pleasure; around the plate lay the bodies of the flies which had perished in the attack; some dry and shriveled, others swollen and with white and livid abdomens.

Leocadia entered the back shop. Ramon was there, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, exposing his brawny arms, shaking a saucepan gently to cool the egg-paste which it contained; then he proceeded to cut the paste with a hot knife, the sugar fizzing and sending forth a pleasant odor as it came in contact

with the hot metal. The confectioner passed the back of his hand across his perspiring brow.

What did Leocadia want? Brizar anisette, eh? Well, it was all sold. "You, Rosa, isn't it true that the anisette is all sold?"

The confectioner's wife was seated in a corner of the kitchen, feeding a sickly-looking infant. She fixed her gloomy, morbidly jealous gaze on the schoolmistress and cried in a harsh voice:

"If you come for more anisette, remember the three bottles that are still unpaid for."

"I will pay them now," answered the schoolmistress, taking a handful of dollars from her pocket.

"Never mind that now, there is no hurry," stammered the confectioner, ashamed of his wife's rudeness.

"Take it, Ramon. Why, it was to give it to you that I came."

"If you insist; but the deuce a hurry I was in."

Leocadia hastened away. Not to have remembered the confectioner's wife! Who would ask anything from Ramon before that jealous tigress, who, small as she was, and sickly as she looked, ruled her burly husband with a rod of iron. Perhaps Cansin——

The clothier was displaying his goods to a group

of countrywomen, one of whom persisted in declaring the bunting she was looking at to be cotton, rubbing it between her fingers to prove herself in the right. Cansin, on his side, was rubbing the cloth with exactly opposite views.

“How should it be cotton, woman, how should it be cotton?” he cried in his shrill voice, putting the cloth close to the buyer’s face. Cansin appeared so angry that Leocadia did not venture to address him; she passed on, quickening her steps. She thought of her other suitor, the tavern-keeper. But she suddenly remembered, with a feeling of repulsion, his thick lips, his cheeks that seemed to drip blood. Turning over in her mind every possible means by which she might obtain the money she needed, a thought occurred to her. She rejected it, she weighed it, she accepted it. Quickening her pace, she walked toward the abode of the lawyer García.

At her first knock Aunt Gáspara opened the door. What a meaning contraction of the brow and lips, what a sour face greeted her! Leocadia, abashed and covered with confusion, stood still on the threshold. The old woman, like a vigilant watchdog, barred the entrance, ready to bark or bite at the first sign of danger.

“What did you want?” she growled.

“To speak to Don Justo. May I?” said the schoolmistress humbly.

“I don’t know. I’ll see.”

And the dragon without further ceremony shut the door in Leocadia’s face. Leocadia waited. At the end of ten minutes a harsh voice called to her:

“Come on!”

The heart of the schoolmistress bounded within her. To go through the house in which Segundo was born! It was dark and shabby, cold and bare, like the abode of a miser, in which the furniture is made to do service until it falls to pieces with old age. Crossing a hall, Leocadia saw through a half-open door some garments belonging to Segundo hanging on a peg, and recognized them with a secret thrill. At the end of the hall was the lawyer’s office, an ill-kept, untidy room, full of papers and dusty and uninteresting-looking books. Aunt Gáspara withdrew, and Leocadia remained standing before the lawyer, who, without inviting her to be seated, said to her with a suspicious and hostile air, and in the severe tones of a judge:

“And what can I do for you, Señora Dona Leocadia?”

A formula accompanied inwardly by the observation:

"I wager that the scheming schoolmistress has come to tell me that she is going to marry that crazy boy and that I shall have to support them both."

Leocadia fixed her dejected gaze on García's face, trying to discover in his dry and withered features some resemblance to the features of a beloved countenance. His face, indeed, resembled Segundo's in all but the expression, which was very different; that of the father's being as cautious and suspicious as the son's was dreamy and abstracted.

"Señor Don Justo——" stammered the schoolmistress. "I am sorry to trouble you. I hope you will not take this visit amiss—they told me that you—— Señor—I need a loan——"

"Money!" roared the lawyer, clenching his fists. "You ask me for money!"

"Yes, Señor, on some property——"

"Ah!" (sudden transition in the lawyer, who became all softness and amiability). "But how stupid I am! Come in, come in and sit down, Doña Leocadia. I hope you are quite well. Why, anyone might find himself in a difficulty. And what property is it? Talking together people come to an understanding, Señora. Perhaps the vineyard of La Junqueira, or the other little one, El Adro? Of late years they have yielded little——"

The business was discussed and the promissory note was signed. Aunt Gáspara meanwhile walked uneasily and with ghost-like tread, up and down the hall outside. When her brother issued from the room and gave her some orders she crossed herself hastily several times on the forehead and the breast. She then descended stealthily to the cellar, and, after some little delay, returned and emptied on the lawyer's table the contents of her apron, whence rolled four objects covered with dust and cobwebs, from which proceeded, as they struck the table, the peculiar sound produced by coin. These objects were an earthen savings-bank, a stocking, a leathern sack, and a little muslin bag.

That afternoon Leocadia said to Segundo :

“Do you know what, sweetheart? It is a pity that for the sake of a new suit or some such trifle you should lose the chance of establishing yourself and obtaining what you wish. See, I have a little money here that I have no particular use for. Do you want it, eh? I will give it to you now and you can return it to me by and by.”

Segundo drew himself up and, with a genuine outburst of offended dignity, exclaimed :

“Never propose anything like that to me again. I accept your attentions at times so as not to see you

breaking your heart at my refusal, but that you should clothe me and support me—no, that is too much.”

Half an hour later the schoolmistress renewed her entreaties affectionately, availing herself of the opportunity, seeing the Swan somewhat pensive. Between him and her there ought to be no *mine* or *thine*. Why should he hesitate to accept what it afforded her so great a pleasure to give? Did her future by chance depend upon those few paltry dollars? With them he could present himself decently at Las Vides, publish his verses, go to Madrid. It would make her so happy to see him triumph, eclipse Campoamor, Nuñez de Arce, and all the rest! And what was there to prevent Segundo from returning her the money, and with interest, too? Talking thus, Leocadia filled a handkerchief tied at the four corners with ounces and *doblillos* and *centenes* and handed it to the poet, saying in a voice rendered husky by her emotion:

“Will you slight me?”

Segundiño took the unbeautiful, ungraceful head of the schoolmistress between his hands, and looking fixedly in the eyes that looked at him humid with happiness he said:

“Leocadia, I know that you are the one human being in this world who loves me truly.”

“Segundiño, my life,” she stammered, beside herself with happiness, “it isn’t worth mentioning. Just as I give you that—as I hope for salvation—I would give you the blood from my veins!”

And what would Aunt Gáspara have said had she known that several of the ounces from the stocking, the savings-bank, the sack, and the bag would return immediately, loyal and well-trained, to sleep, if not under the rafters of the cellar, at least under the roof of Don Justo?

IX.

THE grapevine of Las Vides which has such pleasant recollections for Don Victoriano Andres de la Comba, bears those large, substantial grapes of the light red and pale green hues which predominate in Flemish vineyards, which are known in the neighborhood by the name of *náparo* or *Jaen* grapes. Its clusters hang in long corymbs of a gracefully irregular shape, half hiding themselves among the thick foliage. The vine casts a cool shade, and the murmur of a slender stream of water that falls into a rough stone basin in which vegetables lie soaking, adds to the air of peacefulness of the scene.

The massive building looks almost like a fortress; the main building is flanked by two square towers, low-roofed and pierced by deep-set windows; in the middle of the central building, above a long iron balcony, stands out the large escutcheon with the armorial bearings of the Mendez—five vine-leaves and a wolf's head dripping blood. This balcony commands a view of the mountain slope and of the river that winds below; at the side of one of the

towers is a wooden gallery, open to the sun, which projects over the garden, and where, thanks to the southern exposure, fine carnations grow luxuriantly in old pots filled with mold, and wooden boxes overflow with sweet basil, Santa Teresa's feathers, cactus, asclepias, and mallows—a sun-loving, rich, Arabian flora of intoxicating sweetness. The interior of the house is merely a series of whitewashed rooms with the rafters exposed and almost without furniture, excepting the central room, called the balcony-room, which is furnished with chairs with straw seats and wooden, lyre-shaped backs, of the style of the Empire. A mirror from which the quicksilver has almost disappeared, with a broad ebony frame ornamented with allegorical figures of gilded brass representing Phœbus driving his chariot, hangs above the sofa. The pride of Las Vides is not the rooms, but the cellar, the immense wine-vault, dark, and echoing, and cool as the aisle of a cathedral, with its large vats ranged in a line on either side. This apartment, unrivaled in the Border, is the one which Señor de las Vides shows with most pride—this and his bedroom, which has the peculiarity of being impregnable, as it is built in the body of the wall and can be entered only through a narrow passage which scarcely affords room for a man to turn around.

Mendez de las Vides resembled in no way the traditional type of the ignorant lord of the manor who makes a cross for his signature, a type very common in that inland country. On the contrary, Mendez prided himself on being learned and cultured. He wrote a good hand—the small, close handwriting characteristic of obstinate old age; he read well, settling his spectacles on his nose, holding the newspaper or the book at a distance, emphasizing the words in a measured voice. Only his culture was confined to a single epoch—that of the Encyclopedists, with whom his father became acquainted late in life, and he himself a century after their time. He read Holbach, Rousseau, Voltaire, and the fourteen volumes of Feijóo. He bore the stamp and seal of this epoch even in his person. In religion he was a deist, never neglecting, however, to go to mass and to eat fish in Holy Week; in politics he was inclined to uphold the prerogatives of the crown against the church. Since the arrival of Don Victoriano, however, some movement had taken place in the stratified ideas of the hidalgo of Las Vides. He admired English independence, the regard paid to the right of the individual combined with a respect for tradition and the civilizing influence of the aristocratic classes—a series of Saxon importations more

or less felicitous but to which Don Victoriano owed his political success. Uncle and nephew spent hour after hour discussing these abstruse problems of social science, while Nieves worked, listening with the hope of hearing the trot of some horse sound on the stones of the path announcing some visitor, some distraction in her idle existence.

To make the journey to Las Vides, Segundo borrowed the vicious nag of the alguazil. From the cross onward the road grew precipitous and difficult. Smooth, slippery rocks obstructed the way at times, so that the rider was obliged to hold a tight rein to keep the animal, whose hoofs slipped continually, drawing sparks from the stone, from falling headlong down the descent. The ground, parched by the heat, was rugged and uneven. The houses seemed to cling to the mountain-side, threatening to lose their hold at every moment and topple over into the river, and the indispensable pot of carnations, whose flowers peeped through the rails of the wooden balconies, reminded one of the flower with which a gypsy carelessly adorns her hair. Sometimes Segundo's way led through a pine grove, and he inhaled the balsamic odor of the resin and rode over a carpet of dry leaves which deadened the sound of his horse's hoofs; suddenly, between two fences, a

narrow path, bordered by blackberry bushes, fox-glove and honeysuckle would open before him, and not unfrequently he experienced the delightful sense of well-being produced by the coolness cast by umbrageous foliage during the heat of the day, as he rode through some verdant tunnel—under some lofty grape arbor supported on wooden posts, beholding above his head the bunches already ripening, and listening to the noisy twittering of the sparrows and the shrill whistle of the blackbird. Lizards ran along the moss-covered walls. When two or more paths met Segundo would rein in his horse, to inquire the way to Las Vides of the women who toiled wearily up the steep path, bending under their load of pine wood, or the children playing at the doors of the houses.

Far below ran the Avieiro, that, from the height at which Segundo regarded it, looked like a steel blade flashing and quivering in the sunshine. Before him was the mountain where, like the steps of a colossal amphitheater, rose one above another massive walls of whitish stone, erected for the support of the grapevines, the white stripes showing against the green background, forming an odd combination in which stood out here and there the red roof of some dove-cote or some old homestead, the whole surmounted

by the darker green of the pine woods. Segundo at last saw below him the tiles of Las Vides. He descended a steep slope and found himself before the portico.

Under the grapevine were Victorina and Nieves. The child was amusing herself jumping the rope, which she did with extraordinary agility, the feet close together, without moving from one spot, the rope turning so rapidly that the graceful form of the jumper seemed to be enveloped in a sort of mist. Through the interstices in the foliage of the grapevine came large splashes of sunshine suddenly flooding the girl's form with light, in which her hair, her arms and her bare legs gleamed, for she wore only a loose navy blue blouse without sleeves. When she caught sight of Segundo she gave a little cry, dropped the rope and disappeared. Nieves, to make amends, rose from the bench where she had been working, with a smile on her lips and a slight flush of surprise on her cheeks, and extended her hand to the newcomer, who made haste to dismount from his horse.

"And Señor Don Victoriano, how is he?" he asked.

"Oh, he is somewhere in the neighborhood; he is very well, and very much interested in the labors of

the country—very contented.” Nieves said these words with the abstracted air with which we speak of things that possess only a slight interest for us. Segundo observed that the glance of the Minister’s wife rested on his fine suit, which he had just received from Orense; and the idea that she might think it pretentious or ridiculous disturbed him so greatly for a time that he regretted not having worn his ordinary clothes.

“You frightened away Victorina,” continued Nieves, smiling. “Where can the silly child have disappeared to? No doubt she ran away because she had on only a blouse. You treat her like a woman, and she is growing unbearable. Come.”

Nieves gathered up the skirt of her morning gown of white cretonne spotted with rosebuds, and made her way intrepidly into the kitchen, which was on a level with the yard. Following the little Louis XV. heels covered by the Breton lace of her petticoat, Segundo passed through several rooms—the kitchen, the dining-room, the Rosary room, so called because in it Primo Genday said prayers with the servants, and finally the balcony room. Here Nieves stopped, saying:

“I will call to them if they chance to be in the vineyard.”

And leaning out of the window, she cried :

“Uncle! Victoriano! Uncle!”

Two voices responded.

“What is it? We are coming.”

Finding nothing opportune to say, Segundo was silent. Her conscience at rest, now that she had called the elders, Nieves turned toward him and said, with the graciousness of a hostess who knows what are the duties of her position :

“How good this is of you! We had not thought you would care to come before the vintage. And now that the holidays are approaching—indeed I supposed we should see you in Vilamorta before seeing you here, as Victoriano has determined to take a fortnight’s course of the waters.”

She leaned against the wall as she spoke, and Segundo tapped the toe of his boot with his whip. From the garden came the voice of Mendez :

“Nieves! Nieves! Come down, if it is all the same to you.”

“Excuse me, I am going for a parasol.”

She soon returned, and Segundo offered her his arm. They descended into the garden through the gallery, and after the customary greetings were over Mendez protested against Segundo’s returning that afternoon to Vilamorta.

“The idea! A pretty thing that would be! To expose yourself to the heat twice in the same day!”

And Señor de las Vides, availing himself of an opportunity which no rural proprietor ever lets slip, took possession of the poet and gave himself up to the task of showing him over the estate. He explained to him at the same time his viticultural enterprises. He had been among the first to employ sulphur fumigation with success, and he was now using new manures which would perhaps solve the problem of grape cultivation. He was making experiments with the common wine of the Border, trying to make with it an imitation of the rich Bordeaux; to impart to it, with powdered lily-root, the bouquet, the fragrance, of the French wines. But he had to contend against the spirit of routine, fanaticism, as he said, confidentially lowering his voice and laying his hand on Segundo's shoulder. The other vine-growers accused him of disregarding the wholesome traditions of the country, of adulterating and making up wine. As if they themselves did not make it up. Only that they did so, using common drugs for the purpose—logwood and nightshade. He contented himself with employing rational methods, scientific discoveries, the improvements of modern chemistry, condemning the absurd

custom of using pitch in the skins, for although the people of the Border approved of the taste of pitch in the wine, saying that the pitch excited thirst, the exporters disliked, and with reason, the stickiness imparted by it. In short, if Segundo would like to see the wine vaults and the presses——

There was no help for it. Nieves remained at the door, fearing to soil her dress. When they came out they proceeded to inspect the garden in detail. The garden, too, was a series of walls built one above another, like the steps of a stairs, sustaining narrow belts of earth, and this arrangement of the ground gave the vegetation an exuberance that was almost tropical. Camellias, peach trees, and lemon trees grew in wild luxuriance, laden at once with leaves, fruits, and blossoms. Bees and butterflies circled and hummed around them, sipping their sweets, wild with the joy of mere existence and drunken with the sunshine. They ascended by steep steps from wall to wall. Segundo gave his arm to Nieves and at the last step they paused to look at the river flowing below.

“Look there,” said Segundo, pointing to a distant hill on his left. “There is the pine grove. I wager you have forgotten.”

"I have not forgotten," responded Nieves, winking her blue eyes dazzled by the sun; "the pine grove that sings. You see that I have not forgotten. And tell me, do you know if it will sing to-day? For I should greatly like to hear it sing this afternoon."

"If a breeze rises. With the air as still as it is now, the pines will be almost motionless and almost silent. And I say *almost*, for they are never quite silent. The friction of their tops is sufficient to cause a peculiar vibration, to produce a murmur——"

"And does that happen," asked Nieves jestingly, "only with the pines here or is it the same with all pines?"

"I cannot say," answered Segundo, looking at her fixedly. "Perhaps the only pine grove that will ever sing for me will be that of Las Vides."

Nieves lowered her eyes, and then glanced round, as if in search of Don Victoriano and Mendez, who were on one of the steps above them. Segundo observed the movement and with rude imperiousness said to Nieves:

"Let us join them."

They rejoined their companions and did not again separate from them until they entered the dining-room, where Genday and Tropiczo were awaiting

them. The last to arrive was the child, now modestly attired in a piqué frock and long stockings.

The table at which they dined was placed, not in the center, but at one side of the dining-room; it was square and at the sides, instead of chairs, stood two oaken benches, dark with age, as seats for the guests. The head and foot of the table were left free for the service. Sober by nature, Segundo noticed with surprise the extraordinary quantity of food consumed by Don Victoriano, observing at the same time that his face was thinner than before. Now and then the statesman paused remorsefully, saying:

“I am eating ravenously.”

The Amphytrion protested, and Tropiezo and Genday expounded in turn liberal and consoling doctrines. “Nature is very wise,” said Señor de las Vides, who had not forgotten Rousseau, “and he who obeys her cannot go astray.” Primo Genday, fond of eating, like all plethoric people, added with a certain theological unction: “In order that the soul may be disposed to serve God the reasonable requirements of the body must first be attended to.” Tropiezo, on his side, pushed out his lower lip, denying the existence of certain new-fangled diseases. Since the

world began there had been people who suffered as Don Victoriano was suffering and no one had ever thought of depriving them of eating and drinking, quite the contrary. For the very reason that the disease was a wasting one it was necessary to eat well. Don Victoriano allowed himself to be easily persuaded. Those dishes of former times, those antiquated, miraculous cruet-stands in which the oil and the vinegar came from the same tube without ever mingling, that immense loaf placed on the table as a center-piece, were for him so many delightful relics of the past, which reminded him of happy hours, the irresponsible years of existence. At the dessert, when Primo Genday, still heated with a political discussion in which he had characterized the liberals as uncircumcised, suddenly grew very serious and proceeded to recite the Lord's Prayer, the Minister, a confirmed rationalist, was surprised at the devoutness with which he murmured—"Our daily bread." *Caramba*, those memories of the days when one was young! Don Victoriano grew young again in going over those recollections of his boyish days. He even called to mind ephemeral engagements, flirtations of a fortnight with young ladies of the Border who, at the present time, must be withered old

maids or respectable mothers of families. A pretty fool he was! The ex-Minister laid down his napkin and rose to his feet.

“Do you sleep the siesta?” he asked Segundo.

“No, Señor.”

“Nor I either; let us go and smoke a cigar together.”

X.

THEY seated themselves near the window in the parlor in a couple of rocking-chairs brought from Orense. The garden and the vineyard breathed a lazy tranquillity, a silence so profound that the dull sound of the ripe peaches breaking from the branch and falling on the dry ground could be plainly heard. Through the open window came odors of fruit and honey. In the house unbroken silence reigned.

“Will you have a cigar?”

“Thanks.”

The cigars were lighted and Segundo, following Don Victoriano's example, began to rock himself. The rhythmical movement of the rocking-chairs, the drowsy quiet of the place, invited to a serious and confidential conversation.

“And you, what do you do in Vilamorta? You are a lawyer, are you not. I think I have heard that it is your intention to succeed your father in his practice—a very intelligent man.”

Segundo felt that the occasion was propitious.

The smoke of the cigars, diffusing itself through the atmosphere, softened the light, disposing him to confidence and dispelling his habitual reserve.

“The thought of beginning now the career my father is just ending horrifies me,” he said, in answer to the ex-Minister’s question. “That sordid struggle to gain a little money, more or less, those village intrigues, that miserable plotting and planning, that drawing-up of documents—I was made for none of those things, Señor Don Victoriano. It is not that I could not practice. I have been a fair student and my good memory always brought me safely through in the examinations. But for what does the profession of law serve? For a foundation, nothing more. It is a passport, a card of admission to some office.”

“Well——” said Don Victoriano, shaking the ashes from his cigar, “what you say is true, very true. What is learned at the University is of scarcely any use afterward. As for me, if it had not been for my apprenticeship with Don Juan Antonio Prado, who taught me to make a practical use of my legal knowledge and to know how many teeth there are in a comb, I should not have distinguished myself greatly by my Compostelan learning. My friend, what makes a man of one, what really profits one is this terrible apprenticeship, the position in which a

boy finds himself when a pile of papers is set before him, and a pompous gentleman says to him, 'Study this question to-day and have ready for me by to-morrow a formulated opinion on it.' There is the rub! That is what makes you sweat and bite your nails! There neither laziness nor ignorance will avail you. The thing must be done, and as it cannot be done by magic——"

"Even in Madrid and on a large scale the practice of the law has no attractions for me. I have other aspirations."

"Let us hear what they are."

Segundo hesitated, restrained by a feeling of shyness, as if he had been going to narrate a dream or to descant on the delights of love. He followed with his eyes for a few moments the blue smoke curling upward and finally, the semi-obscurity of the room, secluded as a confessional, dissipated his reserve.

"I wish to follow the profession of literature," he returned.

The statesman stopped rocking himself and took his cigar from his mouth.

"But my boy, literature is not a profession!" he said. "There is no such thing as the profession of literature! Let us understand each other—have

you ever been out of Vilamorta? I mean beyond Santiago and the neighboring towns?"

"No, Señor."

"Then I can understand those illusions and those childish notions. They still believe here that a writer or a poet, from the mere fact of his being such, may aspire to—and what do you write?"

"Poetry."

"You don't write prose at all?"

"An occasional essay or newspaper article. Very little."

"Bravo! Well, if you trust to poetry to make your way in the world—I have remarked something curious in this place and I am going to tell you what it is. Verses are still read here with interest, and it seems the girls learn them by heart. But in the capital I assure you there is scarcely anyone who cares for poetry. You are twenty or thirty years behind the age here—at the height of the romantic period."

Segundo, annoyed, said with some vehemence:

"And Campoamor? And Nunez de Arce? And Grilo? Are they not famous poets? Are they not popular?"

"Campoamor? They read him because he is very witty, and he sets the girls thinking and he makes

the men laugh. He has his merit, and he amuses while he philosophizes. But remember that neither he nor Nuñez de Arce lives by writing verses. Much prosperity that would bring them! As to Grilo—well, he has his admirers among ladies of rank, and the Queen Mother publishes his poems, and as far as we can judge he has plenty of money. But convince yourself that no one will ever grow rich by following the road that leads to Parnassus. And this is when masters are in question, for of poets of a secondary rank, young men who string rhymes together with more or less facility, there are probably now in Madrid some two or three hundred. Have you ever heard of any of them? No; nor I either. A few friends praise them when they publish anything in some insignificant review. But there is no need to go on. In plain words, it is time lost.”

Segundo silently vented his anger on his cigar.

“Don’t take what I say as an offense,” continued Don Victoriano. “I know little about literature, although in my youthful days I wrote *quintillas*, like everybody else. Besides, I have seen nothing of what you have written, so that my opinion is impartial and my advice sincere.”

“My ambition,” began Segundo at last, “is not

confined exclusively to lyric poetry. Perhaps later I might prefer the drama—or prose. Who knows? I only want to try my fortune.”

Don Victoriano rose and stepped out into the balcony. Suddenly he returned, placed both hands on Segundo's shoulders, and putting his clean-shaven face close to the face of the poet, said with a pity which was not feigned:

“Poor boy! How many, many disappointments are in store for you!”

And as Segundo, astonished at this sudden effusion, remained silent, he continued:

“Novice as you are, you have no means of knowing what you are doing. I am sorry for you. You are deluding yourself. In the present state of society, in order to attain eminence in anything, you must sweat blood like Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. If it is lyric poetry that is in question, God help you! If you write comedies or farces, you have an enviable fate before you—to flatter the actors, to have your manuscript lie neglected in the corner of a drawer, to have half an act cut out at a stroke; and then the dread of the first night, and of what comes after it—which may be the worst of all. If you become a journalist, you will not have ten minutes in the day to yourself, you will make the

reputation of others, and you will never see even so much as the shadow of your own. If you write books—but who reads in Spain? And if you throw yourself into politics—ah, then indeed!”

Segundo, his eyes cast down, his gaze wandering over the pine knots in the boarded floor, listened without opening his lips to those convincing accents that seemed to tear away one by one the rose-leaves of his illusions, with the same strident sound with which the nail of the speaker flicked away the ash of his cigar. At last he raised his contracted face and looking at the statesman said, not without a touch of sarcasm in his voice:

“As for politics, Señor Don Victoriano, it seems to me that you ought not to speak ill of that. It has treated you well; you have no cause of complaint against it. For you politics has not been a stepmother.”

Don Victoriano's countenance changed, showing plainly the ravages disease had made in his organism; and rising to his feet a second time, he threw away his cigar and, walking up and down the room with hasty steps, he burst forth passionately, in words that rushed from his lips in a sudden flood, in an impetuous and unequal stream, like the stream of blood gushing from a severed artery:

“Don’t touch that point. Be silent about that, boy. How do you, how does anybody know what those things are until he has thrown himself headlong into them and is caught fast and cannot escape! If I were to tell you—but it is impossible to tell one’s whole life, day by day, to describe a battle which has lasted for years, without rest or respite. To struggle in order to make one’s self known, to go on struggling to keep one’s self from being forgotten, to pass from law to politics, from a wheel set with knives to a bed of live coals, to fight in Congress without faith, without conviction, because one must fight to keep the place one has won; and with all this not to have a free hour, not a tranquil moment, not have time for anything. One achieves fortune when one no longer has the inclination to enjoy it; one marries and has a family and—one has hardly liberty to accompany one’s wife to the theater. Don’t talk to me. A hell, a hell upon earth is what politics is. Would you believe” (and here he uttered a round oath) “that when my little girl was beginning to walk, I proposed to myself one day to have the pleasure of taking her out walking—a caprice, a whim. Well, I was going downstairs with the child in my arms, very contented, when lo, I found myself face to face with the Mar-

quis of Cameros, a candidate for representative from Galicia, who had come to ask me for fifteen or twenty letters—written in my own hand so that they might prove more efficacious. And I was such a fool, man, I was such a fool, that instead of throwing the Marquis down the stairs, as I ought to have done, I walked back my two flights, gave the child to her nurse, and shut myself up in my office to prepare the election. And it was the same thing always; tell me, then, have I reason or not to abominate such folly, such humbug? Ah, what pains we are at to make ourselves miserable!”

There could be no doubt of it; in the voice of the statesman there was the sound of repressed tears; in his throat smothered curses and blasphemies struggled for utterance. Segundo, to do something, threw open the window leading to the balcony. The sun was low in the heavens; the heat had grown less intense.

“And worst of all—the consequences!” continued Don Victoriano, pausing in his walk. “You strive and struggle without pausing to reflect what will be the effect upon your health. You fight, like the knights of old, with visor down. But as you are not made of iron, but only of flesh and blood, when you

least expect it, you find yourself sick, sick, wounded, without knowing where. You do not lose blood, but you lose the sap of life, like a lemon that is squeezed." And the ex-Minister laughed bitterly. "And you want to stop, to rest, to get back health at any cost, and you find that it is too late; you have not a drop of moisture left in your body. Well, keep on until there is an end to you. Much your labors and your triumphs have profited you! You have drawn down on yourself a doom from which there is no escape!"

He spoke with gesticulations, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets in an outburst of confidence, expressing himself with as little reserve as if he had been alone. And in reality he was talking to himself. His words were a monologue, the spoken utterance of the gloomy thoughts which Don Victoriano, thanks to heroic efforts, had hitherto been able to conceal in his own breast. The strange malady from which he suffered gave rise to horrible nightmares; he dreamed that he was turning into a loaf of sugar and that his intellect, his blood, his life, were flowing away from him, through a deep, deep channel, converted into syrup. In his waking moments his mind refused to accept, as one refused to accept a humiliation, so strange a malady. Sanchez

del Abrojo must be mistaken; his was some functional, transitory disorder, an ordinary ailment, the result of his sedentary life, and Tropiezo's old-fashioned remedies would perhaps after all prove more efficacious than those of science. And if they did not? The statesman felt a cold chill run through him that made his hair stand on end and constricted his heart. To die when he was scarcely past forty, with his mental powers unimpaired, with so many things begun, so many accomplished! And no doubt this consuming thirst, this insatiable voracity, this debilitating sensation of melting away, of fusion, of dissolving, were all fatal symptoms.

Suddenly Don Victoriano remembered the presence of Segundo, which he had almost forgotten. And laying both hands on his shoulders a second time, and fixing on the poet's eyes, his dry eyes, scorched by repressed tears, he cried:

"Do you wish to hear the truth, and to receive good advice? Have you ambitions, aspirations, hopes? Well, I have had disappointments, and I desire to do you a service by recounting them to you now. Don't be a fool; stay here all your life; help your father, take up his practice when he lays it down, and marry that blooming daughter of Agonde. Never leave this land of fruits, of vines,

whose climate is so delightful. What would I not give now never to have left it! No, my boy, remain quietly here; end a long life here surrounded by a numerous progeny. Have you observed how healthy your father is? It is a pleasure to see him, with his teeth so sound and perfect. I have not a single tooth that is not decayed; they say that it is one of the symptoms of my malady. Why, if your mother were living now you would be having little brothers and sisters."

Segundo smiled.

"But, Señor Don Victoriano," he said, "to act out your ideas would be to vegetate, not to live."

"And what greater happiness than to vegetate," responded the statesman, looking out of the window. "Do you think those trees there are not to be envied?"

The garden, indeed, seen in the light of the setting sun, had a certain air of voluptuous bliss, as if it were enjoying a happy dream.

The lustrous leaves of the lemon trees and the camellias, the gummy trunks of the fruit trees, seemed to drink in with delight the fresh evening breeze, precursor of the vivifying dews of night. The golden atmosphere took on in the distance faint lilac tints. Innumerable noises began to make them-

selves heard, preludes to songs of insects, to the concerts of the frogs and toads.

The pensive tranquillity of the scene was broken in upon by the quick trot of a mule, and Clodio Gen-day, out of breath, flung himself out of his saddle, and reeled into the garden. Gesticulating with his hands, with his head, with his whole body, he called, screamed, vociferated:

“Oh, I have a nice piece of news for you, a nice piece of news! I will be there directly, I will be there directly!”

They went to the head of the stairs leading to the garden, to meet him, and when he rushed upon them, like an arrow shot from a bow, they saw that he wore neither collar nor cravat, and that his dress was in the utmost disorder.

“A mere bagatelle, Señor Don Victoriano—that they are playing a trick upon us; that they have played it already, that unless we take prompt measures we shall lose the district. You would not believe it, if I were to tell you of all the plans they have been laying, for a long time past, at Doña Eufrasia’s shop. And we simpletons suspecting nothing. And all the priests are in the plot; the parish priests of Lubrego, of Boan, of Naya, and of Cebre. They have set up as a candidate Señorito de Romero

of Orense, who is willing to loosen his purse-strings. But where is Primo, that good-for-nothing, that scarecrow, who never found out a word of all this?"

"We will look for him, man. What do you tell me, what do you tell me? I never thought they would have dared——"

And Don Victoriano, animated and excited, followed Clodio, who went shouting through the parlor:

"Primo! Primo!"

A little later Segundo saw the two brothers and the ex-Minister going through the garden disputing and gesticulating violently. Clodio was making charges against Primo, who tried to defend himself, while Don Victoriano acted as peacemaker. In his fury Clodio shook his clenched fist in Primo's face, almost laying violent hands upon him, while the culprit stammered, crossing himself hastily:

"Mercy, mercy, mercy! Ave Maria!"

The poet watched them as they passed by, remarking the transformation that had taken place in Don Victoriano. As he turned away from the window he saw Nieves standing before him.

"And those gentlemen," she said to him graciously, "have they left you all alone? The pines must at this time be singing. There is a breeze stirring."

“Undoubtedly they will be singing now,” returned the poet. “I shall hear them as I ride back to Vilamorta.”

Nieves' movement of surprise did not pass unnoticed by Segundo, who, looking her steadily in the face, added coldly and proudly: “Unless you should command me to remain.”

Nieves was silent. She felt that courtesy required that she should make some effort to detain her guest, while at the same time to ask him to remain, they two being alone, seemed to her inexpedient and liable to misconstruction. At last she took a middle course, saying with a forced smile:

“But why are you in such a hurry? And will you make us another visit?”

“We shall see each other later in Vilamorta. Good-by, Nieves, I will not disturb Don Victoriano. Say good-by to him for me and tell him he may count upon my father's services and upon mine.”

Without taking Nieves' outstretched hand or looking at her he descended into the courtyard. He was settling his feet in the stirrups when he saw a little figure appear close beside him. It was Victorina, with her hands full of lumps of sugar, which she offered the nag. The animal eagerly pushed

out its under lip, which moved with the intelligent undulations of an elephant's trunk.

Segundo interposed :

"Child, he will bite you ; he bites."

Then he added gayly :

"Do you want me to lift you up here? You don't? I wager I can lift you!"

He lifted her up and seated her on the saddle-cloth, before him. She struggled to free herself and in her struggles her beautiful hair fell over the face and shoulders of Segundo, who was holding her tightly around the waist. He observed with some surprise that the girl's heart was beating tumultuously. Turning very pale Victorina cried :

"Mamma, mamma!"

At last she succeeded in releasing herself and ran toward Nieves, who was laughing merrily at the incident. Half-way she stopped, retraced her steps, threw her arms around the horse's neck and pressed on his nose a warm kiss.

XI.

EIGHT or ten days intervened between Segundo's visit to Las Vides and the return of Don Victoriano and his family to Vilamorta. Don Victoriano desired to drink the waters and at the same time to take measures to frustrate the dark machinations of Romero's partisans. His plan was a simple one—to offer Romero some other district, where he would not have to spend a penny, and thus removing the only rival who had any prestige in the country he would avoid the mortification of a defeat through Vilamorta. It was important to do this before October, the period at which the electoral contest was to take place. And while Genday, García, the Alcalde and the other Combistas managed the negotiation, Don Victoriano, installed in Agonde's house, drank two or three glasses of the salubrious waters every morning, after which he read his correspondence, and in the afternoon, when the sultry heat invited to a siesta, he read or wrote in the cool parlor of the apothecary.

Segundo frequently accompanied him in these

hours of retirement. They talked together like two friends, and the statesman, far from insisting on the ideas he had expressed in *Las Vides*, encouraged the poet, offering him to endeavor to obtain a position for him in Madrid which should enable him to carry out his plans.

"A position that will not take up much of your time, nor require much mental labor—I will see, I will see. I will be on the lookout for something."

Segundo observed unmistakable signs of improved health in the wrinkled face of the Minister. Don Victoriano was experiencing the transitory benefit which mineral waters produce at first, stimulating the organism only to waste it all the more rapidly, perhaps, afterward. Both digestion and circulation had become more active, and perspiration, even, entirely suppressed by the disease, had become re-established, dilating the pores with grateful warmth and communicating to the dry fibers the elasticity of healthy flesh. As a candle flares up brightly before going out, so Don Victoriano seemed to be recovering strength when in reality he was wasting away. Fancying health was returning to him, he breathed with delight the narrow atmosphere of party intrigues, taking pleasure in disputing his district inch by inch, in winning over adherents and re-

ceiving demonstrations of sympathy, and secretly flattered by the absurd proposal made by his parishioners to the parish priest of Vilamorta, that incense should be burned before him. In the evening he amused himself patriarchally among Agonde's visitors, listening to the comical stories told of the clique at Doña Eufrasia's shop and enjoying the ripple of excitement occasioned by the proximity of the feasts. Little by little the innocent tresillo table of Agonde had become transformed into something much more wicked. Now, instead of four persons being seated at it, there was only one, around whom, their eyes fixed on his hands, the others stood grouped. The banker's left hand grasped the cards tightly while with the ball of his thumb he pushed up the last card until first the spot could be descried, then the number, then the knob of a club, the point of a diamond, the blue tail of a horse, the turreted crown of a king, and other hands took up stakes or took money from the pocket and laid it down on the fateful pieces of cardboard with the words:

"On the seven! On the four! The ace is in sight!"

Through respect for Don Victoriano, Agonde refrained from dealing the cards when the latter was

present, bridling with difficulty the only passion that could warm his blood and excite his placid nature, giving up his place to Jacinto Ruedas, a famous strolling gambler, known everywhere, who followed the scent of the gaming-table as others follow the scent of a banquet, a rare type, something between a swindler and a spy, who made low jests in a hoarse voice. The chroniclers do not state whether the civil authorities, that is to say, the judge of Vilamorta, made any attempt to interfere with the unlawful diversion in which the visitors to the pharmacy indulged, but it is an ascertained fact that, the judge having one leg shorter than the other, the pounding of his crutch on the sidewalk gave timely warning of his approach to the players. And as for the municipal authority, it is known to a certainty that one day, or to speak with more exactness, one night, he entered the apothecary's back shop like a bomb, holding in his hand money which he threw on a card, crying:

"Gentlemen, I am queen!"

"Be an ass, if you like!" responded Agonde, pushing him away with marked disrespect.

This year Don Victoriano's presence and the open hostilities waged between his partisans and those of Romero gave a martial character to the feasts. The

Combists desired to render them more splendid and brilliant than ever before and the Romerists to render them a failure, as far as it was possible. In the main room of the townhall the monster balloon, which occupied the whole length of the apartment, was being repaired; its white sides were being covered with inscriptions, figures, emblems, and symbols, and around the floor were scattered tin kettles filled with paste, pots of vermilion, Sienna, and ochre, balls of packthread and cut paper figures. From the giant balloon sprung daily broods of smaller balloons, miniature balloons, made with remnants and fancifully decorated in pink and blue. At the meetings at Doña Eufrasia's they spoke contemptuously of these preparations and commented on the audacity of the inn-keeper's son, a mere dauber, who undertook to paint Don Victoriano's likeness on one of the divisions of the large balloon. The Romerist young ladies, compressing their lips and shrugging their shoulders, declared that they would attend neither the fire-works nor the ball, not if their adversaries were to offer novenas with that purpose to every saint in heaven.

On the other hand, the young ladies of the Combist party formed a sort of court around Nieves. Every afternoon they called for her to take her out

walking; chief among these were Carmen Agonde, Florentina, the daughter of the Alcalde, Rosa, a niece of Tropiezo, and Clara, the eldest of García's daughters. This latter was running about bare-footed, spending her time gathering blackberries in her apron, when she received the astounding news that her father had ordered a gown for her from Orense, that she might visit the Minister's lady. And the gown came with its fresh bows and its stiff linings and the girl, her face and hands washed, her hair combed, her feet covered with new kid boots, her eyes cast down and her hands crossed stiffly before her, went to swell Nieves' train. Victorina took Clara García under her especial protection, arranged her dress and hair and made her a present of a bracelet, and they became inseparable companions.

They generally walked on the highroad, but as soon as Clara grew more intimate with Victorina she protested against this, declaring that the paths and the by-ways were much more amusing and that much prettier things were to be met with in them. And she pressed Victorina's arm saying:

"Segundo knows lovely walks!"

As chance would have it, that same afternoon, returning to the town, they caught sight of a man stealing along in the shadow of the houses, and

Clara, who was on the other side of the way, ran over to him, and threw her arm around his waist, crying :

“Hey, Segundo; you can’t escape from us now, we have caught you.”

The poet gave a brotherly push to Clara, and ceremoniously saluting Nieves, who returned his salutation with extreme cordiality, he said to her :

“The idea of this girl—I am sure she has been making herself troublesome to you. You must excuse her.”

They sat down on one of the benches of the Plaza, to enjoy the fresh air, and when, on the following day the party walked out after the siesta, Segundo joined them, studiously avoiding Nieves as if some secret understanding, some mysterious complicity existed between them. He mingled among the girls and, laying aside his habitual reserve, he laughed and jested with Victorina, for whom he gathered, as they walked along the hedges, ripe blackberries, acorns, early chestnut burrs, and innumerable wild flowers, which the girl put into a little Russian leather satchel.

Sometimes Segundo led them along precipitous paths cut in the living rock, bordered by walls, supporting grapevines through which the expiring rays of the sun could scarcely penetrate. Again he

would take them through bare and arid woods until they reached some old oak grove, some chestnut tree, inside whose trunk, decayed and split with age, Segundo would hide himself while the girls hand in hand danced around it.

One day he took them to the stone bridge that crossed the Avieiro, under whose arches the black water, cold and motionless, seems to be dreaming a sinister dream. And he told them how in this spot, where, owing to the water being deeper there and less exposed to the sun's rays, the largest trout gathered, a corpse had been found floating last month near the arch. He took them to hear the echo also, and all the girls were wild with delight, talking all together, without waiting for the wall to repeat their cries and shouts of laughter. On another afternoon he showed them a curious lake regarding which innumerable fables were told in the country—that it had no bottom, that it reached to the center of the earth, that submerged cities could be seen under its surface, that strange woods floated and unknown flowers grew in its waters. The so-called lake was in reality a large excavation, probably a Roman mine that had been flooded with water, which, imprisoned within the chain of hillocks of argillaceous tophus heaped up around it by the miners' shovels,

presented a sepulchral and fantastic aspect, the weird effect of the scene being heightened by the somber character of the marsh vegetation which covered the surface of the immense pool. When it began to grow dark the children declared that this lugubrious scene made them horribly afraid; the girls confessed to the same feeling, and started for the highroad running at the top of their speed, leaving Segundo and Nieves behind. This was the first time they had found themselves alone together, for the poet avoided such occasions. Nieves looked around uneasily and then, meeting Segundo's eyes fixed, ardent and questioning upon hers, lowered her gaze. Then the gloom of the landscape and the solemnity of the hour gave her a contraction of the heart, and without knowing what she was doing she began to run as the girls had done. She heard Segundo's footsteps behind her, and when she at last stopped, at a little distance from the highroad, she saw him smile and could not help smiling herself at her own folly.

"Heavens! What a silly fright!" she cried, "I have made myself ridiculous. I am as bad as the children! But that blessed pool is enough to make one afraid. Tell me, how is it that they have not taken views of it? It is very curious and picturesque."

They returned by the highroad ; it was now quite dark and Nieves, as if wishing to efface the impression made by her childish terror, showed herself gay and friendly with Segundo ; two or three times her eyes encountered his and, doubtless through absent-mindedness, she did not turn them aside. They spoke of the walk of the following day ; it must be along the banks of the river, which was more cheerful than the pond ; the scenery there was beautiful, not gloomy like that of the pool.

In effect the road they followed on the next day was beautiful, although it was obstructed by the osier plantations and canebrakes and the intricate growth of the birches and the young poplars, which at times impeded their progress. Every now and then Segundo had to give his hand to Nieves and put aside the flexible young branches that struck against her face. Notwithstanding all his care, he was unable to save her from wetting her feet and leaving some fragments of the lace of her hat among the branches of a poplar. They stopped at a spot where the river, dividing, formed a sort of islet covered with cats-tails and gladioli. A rivulet running down the mountain-side mingled its waters silently and meekly with the waters of Aviciro. At the river's edge grew plants with dentated leaves and a

variety of ferns and graceful aquatic plants. Segundo knelt down on the wet ground and began to gather some flowers.

“Take them, Nieves,” he said.

She approached and, kneeling on one knee, he handed her a bunch of flowers of a pale turquoise blue, with slender stems, flowers of which she had hitherto seen only imitations, as adornments for hats, and that she had fancied had only a mythical existence; flowers of romance, that she had thought grew only on the banks of the Rhine, which is the home of everything romantic; flowers that have so beautiful a name—*Forget-me-not*.

XII.

NIEVES was what is called an exemplary wife, without a dark page in her history, without a thought of disloyalty to her husband, a coquette only in her dress and in the adornment of her person, and even in these practicing no alluring arts, content to obey slavishly the dictates of fashion.

Her ideal, if she had any, was to lead a comfortable, elegant existence, enjoying the consideration of the world. She had married when she was very young, Don Victoriano settling on her some thousands of dollars, and on the wedding-day her father had called her into his magisterial office and, keeping her standing before him as if she were a criminal, had charged her to respect and obey the husband she had chosen. She obeyed and respected him.

And her obedience and respect were a torture to Don Victoriano, who sought in marriage a compensation for the long years he had spent in his law office; years of loneliness during which his arduous labors and confinement to business had prevented him from forming any tender tie or cultivating gentle

affections, permitting him at the most some hasty pleasure, some reckless and exciting adventure, which did not satisfy his heart. He fancied that the beautiful daughter of the President of the Court would requite him for all the tender joys he had missed and he found with vain and bitter disappointment that Nieves saw in him only the grave husband who is accepted with docility, without repugnance, nothing more. Respecting against his will the peace of this superficial being, he neither could nor dared disturb it, and he fretted his soul with unavailing longings, hastening to the crisis of maturity and multiplying the white patches that streaked his black hair.

When the child was born Don Victoriano hoped to repay himself with interest in new and holy caresses, to take solace in a pure oasis of affection. But the requirements of his position, the hurry of business, the complex obligations and the implacable cares of his existence, interposed themselves between him and a father's joys. He saw his daughter only from a distance, barely succeeding, when the coffee was brought in, in having her for awhile on his knee. And then came the first warnings of his disease.

From the time in which his malady declared itself

with all its afflicting symptoms, Nieves had still less of her husband's society than before; it seemed to her as if she had returned to the rosy days of her girlhood, when she flitted about like a butterfly and played at lovers with her companions, who wrote her fictitious love-letters of an innocent nature, which they put under her pillow.

She never had had much amusement since that time. A great deal of amusement was to be found in the routine of a methodical Madrid life! Yes, there was a period during which the Marquis de Cameros, a rich young client of Don Victoriano's, had come to the house with some frequency, and he had even been asked to dine with them three or four times, without ceremony. Nieves remembered that the Marquis had cast many furtive glances at her, and that they had always met him, by chance, at whatever theater they went to. It did not go beyond this.

Nieves was now in the bloom of her second youth—between twenty-nine and thirty—terrible epoch in a woman's life; and if it brought her no red passion flowers, at least she wished to adorn herself with the romantic forget-me-nots of the poet. It seemed to Nieves that in the porcelain vase of her existence a flower had been wanting, and the fragile blue spray

came to complete the beauty of the drawing-room toy. Bah! What harm was there in all this? It was a childish adventure. Those flowers, preserved between the leaves of a costly prayer-book, inspired her only with thoughts as pallid and sapless as the poor petals now pressed and dry.

She had fastened the blue spray in her bosom. How well it looked among the folds of the *écru* lace!

"Tell me, mamma," Victorina had said to her that night before going to bed, "did Segundo give you those pretty flowers?"

"Oh, I don't remember—yes, I think that García picked them for me."

"Will you give them to me to keep in my little satchel?"

"Go, child, go to bed quickly. Mademoiselle, see that she says her prayers!"

XIII.

THE proximity of the feasts put an end to long walks. The promenaders confined themselves to walks on the highroad, returning soon to the town, where the plaza was crowded with busy people. The promenaders included the young ladies of the Combist party, gayly attired, parish priests, ill-shaven, of sickly aspect and dejected looking, gamblers of doubtful appearance and strangers from the Border—all types which Agonde criticised with mordacity, to Nieves' great amusement.

“Do you see those women there? They are the Señoritas de Gondas, three old maids and a young lady, whom they call their niece, but as they have no brother—— Those other two are the Molendes, from Cebre, very aristocratic people, God save the mark! The fat one thinks herself superior to Lucifer, and the other writes poetry, and what poetry! I tell Segundo García that he ought to propose to her; they would make an excellent pair. They are staying at Lamajosa's; there they are in their element, for Doña Mercedes Lamajosa, when any vis-

itor comes, in order that it may be known that they are noble, says to her daughters: 'Girls, let one of you bring me my knitting; it must be in the press, where the letters-patent of nobility are.' Those two handsome, well-dressed girls are the Caminos, daughters of the judge."

On the eve of the fair the musicians paraded the streets morning and afternoon, deafening everybody with the noise of their triumphal strains. The plaza in front of the townhall was dotted with booths, which made a gay confusion of brilliant and discordant colors. Before the townhall were erected some odd-looking objects which with equal probability might be taken for instruments of torture, children's toys, or scarecrows, but which were in reality fireworks—trees and wheels which were to burn that night, with magnificent pomp, favored by the stillness of the atmosphere. From the window of the building issued, like a Titanic arm, the pole on which was to be hoisted the gigantic balloon, and along the balustrade ran a series of colored glasses, forming the letters V. A. D. L. C.—a delicate compliment to the representative of the district.

It was already dark when Don Victoriano, accompanied by his wife and daughter, set out for the townhall to see the fireworks. It was with difficulty

they made their way through the crowd which filled the plaza, where a thousand discordant noises filled the air—now the timbrel and castanets in some dance, now the buzz of the *sanfona*, now some slow and melancholy popular *copla*, now the shout of some aggressive and quarrelsome drunkard. Agonde gave his arm to Nieves, made way for her among the crowd, and explained to her the programme of the night's entertainment.

"Never was there seen a balloon like this year's," he said; "it is the largest we have ever had here. The Romerists are furious."

"And how has my likeness turned out?" asked Don Victoriano with interest.

"Oh! It is superb. Better than the likeness in *La Ilustracion*."

At the door of the townhall the difficulties increased, and it was necessary to trample down without mercy the country-people—who had installed themselves there, determined not to budge an inch lest they should lose their places—before they were able to pass in.

"See what asses they are," said Agonde. "It makes no difference whether you step over them or not, they won't rise. They have no place to sleep and they intend to pass the night here;

to-morrow they will waken up and return to their villages."

They made their way as best they could over this motley heap in which men and women were crowded together, intertwined, entangled in repulsive promiscuity. Even on the steps of the stairs suspicious-looking groups were lying, or some drunken peasant snored, surfeited with *pulpo*, or some old woman sat counting her coppers in her lap. They entered the hall, which was illuminated only by the dim light shed by the colored glasses. Some young ladies already occupied the space in front of the windows, but the Alcalde, hat in hand, with innumerable apologies, made them draw their chairs closer together to make room for Nieves, Victorina, and Carmen Agonde, around whom an obsequious circle gathered; chairs were brought for the ladies, and the Alcalde took Don Victoriano to the Secretary's office, where a tray, with some bottles of Tostado and some atrocious cigars, awaited him. The young ladies and the children placed themselves in front, leaning on the railing of the balcony, running the risk of having some rocket fall upon them. Nieves remained a little behind, and drew her silver-woven Algerian shawl closer around her, for in this empty, gloomy hall the air was chill. At her side was an empty

chair, which was suddenly occupied by a figure whose outlines were dimly distinguishable in the darkness.

"Why, García," she cried, "it is a cure for sore eyes. We haven't seen you for two days."

"You don't see me now, either, Nieves," said the poet, leaning toward her and speaking in a low voice. "It would be rather difficult to see one here."

"That is true," answered Nieves, confused by this simple remark. "Why have they not brought lights?"

"Because it would spoil the effect of the fireworks. Don't you prefer this species of semi-obscurity?" he added, smiling, before he uttered it, at the choice phrase.

Nieves was silent. Unconsciously she was fascinated by the situation, in which there was a delicate blending of danger and security which was not without a tinge of romance; she felt a sense of security in the proximity of the open window, the young girls crowded around it, the plaza, where the multitude swarmed like ants, and whence came noises like the roaring of the sea, and songs and confused cries full of tender melancholy; but at the same time the solitude and the darkness of the hall and the species of isolation in which she found herself with the Swan

afforded one of those chance occasions which tempt women of weak principles, who are neither so imprudent as to throw themselves headlong into danger, nor so cautious as to fly from its shadow.

Nieves remained silent, feeling Segundo's breath fanning her cheek. Suddenly both started. The first rocket was streaking the sky with a long trail of light, and the noise of the explosion, deadened though it was by distance, drew a cheer from the crowd in the plaza. After this advanced guard came, one after another, at regular intervals, with measured, hollow, deafening sound, eight bombs, the signal announced in the programme of the feasts for the beginning of the display. The window shook with the report and Nieves did not venture to raise her eyes to the sky, fearing, doubtless, to see it coming down with the reverberation of the bombs. After this the noise of the flying fireworks, chasing one another through the solitudes of space, seemed to her soft and pleasant.

The first of these were ordinary rockets, without any novelty whatever—a trail of light, a dull report, and a shower of sparks. But soon came the surprises, novelties, and marvels of art. There were fireworks that exploded, separating into three or four cascades of light that vanished with fantastic swift-

ness in the depths of space; from others fell with mysterious slowness and noiselessness violet, green, and red lights, as if the angels had overturned in the skies a casket of amethysts, emeralds, and rubies. The lights descended slowly, like tears, and before they reached the ground suddenly went out. The prettiest were the rockets which sent down a rain of gold, a fantastic shower of sparks, a stream of drops of light as quickly lighted as extinguished. The delight of the crowd in the plaza, however, was greatest at the fireworks of three explosions and a snake. These were not without beauty; they exploded like simple rockets, sending forth a fiery lizard, a reptile which ran through the sky in serpentine curves, and then plunged suddenly into darkness.

The scene was now wrapped in darkness, now flooded with light, when the plaza would seem to rise to a level with the window, with its swarm of people, the patches of color of the booths and the hundreds of human faces turned upward, beaming with delight at this favorite spectacle of the Galicians, a race which has preserved the Celtic love and admiration for pyrotechnic displays, for brilliantly illuminated nights in which they find a compensation for the cloudy horizon of the day.

Nieves, too, was pleased by the sudden alternations of light and darkness, a faithful image of the ambiguous condition of her soul. When the firmament was lighted up she watched with admiration the bright luminaries that gave a Venetian coloring to these pleasant moments. When everything was again enveloped in darkness she ventured to look at the poet, without seeing him, however, for her eyes, dazzled by the fireworks, were unable to distinguish the outlines of his face. The poet, on his side, kept his eyes fixed persistently on Nieves, and he saw her flooded with light, with that rare and beautiful moonlight glow produced by fireworks, and which adds a hundredfold to the softness and freshness of the features. He felt a keen impulse to condense in one ardent phrase all that the time had now come for saying, and he bent toward her—and at last he pronounced her name!

“Nieves!”

“Well?”

“Had you ever seen fireworks like these before?”

“No; it is a specialty of this province. I like them greatly. If I were a poet like you I would say pretty things about them. Come, invent something, you.”

“Like them happiness brightens our existence, for

a few brief moments, Nieves—but while it brightens, while we feel it——”

Segundo inwardly cursed the high-sounding phrase that he found himself unable to finish. What nonsense he was talking! Would it not be better to bend down a little lower and touch with his lips—— But what if she should scream? She would not scream, he would venture to swear. Courage!

In the balcony a great commotion was heard. Carmen Agonde called to Nieves:

“Nieves, come, come! The first tree—a wheel of fire——”

Nieves rose hastily and went and leaned over the balustrade, thinking that it would not do to attract attention sitting all the evening chatting with Segundo. The tree began to burn at one end, not without difficulty, apparently, spitting forth an occasional red spark; but suddenly the whole piece took fire—a flaming wheel, an enormous wafer of red and green light, which turned round and round, expanding and shaking out its fiery locks and making the air resound with a noise like the report of fire-arms. It was silent for a few brief instants and seemed on the point of going out, a cloud of rosy smoke enveloped it, through which shone a point of light, a golden sun, which soon began to turn with

dizzying rapidity, opening and spreading out into an aureole of rays. These went out one by one, and the sun, diminishing in size until it was no larger than a coal, lazily gave a few languid turns, and, sighing, expired.

As Nieves was returning to her seat she felt a pair of arms thrown around her neck. They were those of Victorina who, intoxicated with delight at the spectacle of the fireworks, cried in her thin voice:

“Mamma, mamma! How lovely! How beautiful! And Carmen says they are going to set off more trees and a wheel——”

She stopped, seeing Segundo standing beside Nieves' chair. She hung her head, ashamed of her childish enthusiasm, and, instead of returning to the window, she remained beside her mother, lavishing caresses upon her to disguise the shyness and timidity which always took possession of her when Segundo looked at her. Two other pieces were burning at two of the corners of the plaza, a pin-wheel and a vase, that sent forth showers of light, first golden, then blue. The child, notwithstanding her admiration for the fireworks, did not appear to have any intention of going to the window to see them, leaving Nieves and Segundo alone. The latter remained seated for some ten minutes longer, but

seeing that the child did not leave her mother's side, he rose quickly, seized by a sudden frenzy, and walked up and down the dimly-lighted hall with hasty steps, conscious that for the moment he was not sufficiently master of himself to maintain outward calmness.

By Heaven, he was well employed! Why had he been fool enough to let slip so favorable an opportunity! Nieves had encouraged him; he had not dreamed it; no; glances, smiles, slight but significant indications of liking and good-will; all these there had been, and they all counseled him to end so ambiguous and doubtful a situation. Ah! If this woman only loved him! And she should love him, and not in jest and as a pastime, but madly! Segundo would not be satisfied with less. His ambitious soul scorned easy and ephemeral triumphs—all or nothing. If the Madridlenian thought of flirting with him she would find herself mistaken; he would seize her by her butterfly wings and, even at the cost of breaking them, he would hold her fast; if one wished to retain a butterfly in his possession he must pierce it through the heart or press it to death. Segundo had done this a thousand times when he was a boy; he would do it now again; he was resolved upon it; whenever a light or mocking

laugh, a reserved attitude or a tranquil look, showed Segundo that Señora de Comba maintained her self-possession, his heart swelled with rage that threatened to suffocate him; and when he saw the child beside her mother, who was keeping up an animated conversation with the little girl, as if she were keeping her there as a protection, he determined that he would not let the night pass without knowing what were her feelings toward him.

He returned to Nieves, but she had now risen and the child was drawing her by the hands to the window; this was the solemn and critical moment; the monster balloon had just been attached to the pole for the purpose of inflating it; and from the plaza came a loud buzz, a buzz of eager expectation. A phalanx of Combist artisans, among whom figured Ramon, the confectioner, were clearing a space around it sufficiently large to allow of the fuse burning freely, so that the difficult operation might be accomplished. The silhouettes of the workmen, illuminated by the light of the fuse, could be seen moving about, bending down, rising up, dancing a sort of mad dance. The darkness was no longer illuminated by the glare of the rockets, and the human sea looked black as a lake of pitch.

Still folded in innumerable folds, its sides clinging

together, the balloon swayed feebly, kissing the ground with its lips of wire, between which the ill-smelling fuse was beginning to burn brightly. The manufacturers of the colossal balloon proceeded to unfold it gently and affectionately, lighting below it other fuses to aid the principal one and hasten the rarification of air in its paper body. This began to distend itself, the folds opening out with a gentle, rustling sound, and the balloon, losing its former limp and lank appearance, began to be inflated in places. As yet the figures on its sides appeared of unnatural length, like figures reflected from the polished, convex surface of a coffee urn; but already several borders and mottoes began to make their appearance here and there, acquiring their natural proportions and positions and showing clearly the coarse red and blue daubs.

The difficulty was that the mouth of the balloon was too large, allowing the rarefied air to escape through it; and if the fuses were made to burn with greater force there was danger of setting the paper on fire and instantly reducing the superb machine to ashes—a terrible calamity which must be prevented at all costs. Therefore many arms were eagerly stretched out to support it, and when the balloon leaned to one side many hands made haste to sus-

tain it—all this to the accompaniment of cries, oaths, and maledictions.

In the plaza the surging crowd continued to increase, and the eager expectancy became momentarily greater. Carmen Agonde, with her mellow laugh, recounted to Nieves the plots that went on behind the scenes. Those who were trying to push their way to the front in order to overturn the fuses and prevent the ascent of the balloon belonged to the Romerist party; a good watch the maker of the fireworks had been obliged to keep to prevent them from wetting his powder trees; but the greatest hatred was to the balloon, on account of its bearing Don Victoriano's likeness; they had vowed and determined that so ridiculous and grotesque an object should not ascend into the air while they had life to prevent it; and that they themselves would construct another balloon, better than that of the town-hall, and that this should be the only one to ascend. For this reason they applauded and uttered shouts of derision every time the gigantic balloon, unable to rise from the earth, fell down feebly to the right or to the left, while Don Victoriano's partisans directed their efforts on the one hand to protect from all injury the enormous bulk of the balloon, on the other to inflate it with warm air to make it rise.

Nieves' eyes were fixed attentively on the monster, but her thoughts were far away. Segundo had succeeded in pushing his way through the crowd in front of the window and was now sitting beside her, on her right. No one was observing them now, and the poet, without preface, passed his arm around Nieves' waist, placing his hand boldly on the spot where, anatomically speaking, the heart is situated. Instead of the elastic and yielding curve of the form and the quickened pulsation of the organ, Segundo felt under his hand the hard surface of one of those long corset-breastplates full of whalebones, and furnished with steel springs, which fashion prescribes at the present day—an apparatus to which Nieves' form owed much of its slender grace. Infernal corset! Segundo could have wished that his fingers were pincers to pierce through the fabric of her gown, through the steel whalebones, through her inner garments, through the flesh and through the very ribs and fasten themselves in her heart, and seize it red-hot and bleeding and crush, tear, annihilate it! Why could he not feel the throbbings of that heart? Leocadia's heart, or even Victorina's, bounded like a bird's when he touched it. And Segundo, enraged, pressed his hand with greater

force, undeterred by the fear of hurting Nieves, desiring, on the contrary, to strangle her.

Surprised at Segundo's audacity, Nieves remained silent, not daring to make the slightest movement, lest by doing so she should attract attention, and protesting only by straightening her form and raising her eyes to his with a look of anguish, soon lowering them, however, unable to resist the expression in the eyes of the poet. The latter continued to search for the absent heart without succeeding in feeling anything more than the throbbing of his own arteries, of his pulse compressed against the unyielding surface of the corset. But fatigue finally conquered, his fingers relaxed their pressure, his arm fell down powerless, and rested without strength or illusion on the form, at once flexible and unyielding, the form of whalebone and steel.

Meanwhile the balloon, in defiance of the Romerist intriguers, continued to expand, as its enormous body was filled with gas and light, illuminating the plaza like a gigantic lantern. It swayed from side to side majestically, and on its immense surface could be read plainly all the inscriptions and laudatory phrases invented by the enthusiastic Combists. The effigy, or rather the colossal figure of Don Victori-

ano, which filled one of its sides completely, followed the curve of the balloon and stood out, so ugly and disproportioned that it was a pleasure to see it; it had two frying-pans for eyes, the pupils being two eggs fried in them, no doubt; for mouth a species of fish or lizard and for beard a tangled forest or map of blots of sienna and lampblack. Giant branches of green laurel crossed each other above the head of the colossus, matching the golden palms of his court dress, represented by daubs of ocher. And the balloon swelled and swelled, its distended sides grew ever tenser and tenser, and it pulled impatiently at the cord that held it, eager to break away and soar among the clouds. The Combists yelled with delight. Suddenly a murmur was heard, a low murmur of expectation.

The cord had been dexterously cut and the balloon, majestic, magnificent, rose a few yards above the ground, bearing with it the apotheosis of Don Victoriano, the glory of his laurels, mottoes and emblems. In the balcony and in the plaza below resounded a salvo of applause and triumphal acclamations. Oh, vanity of human joys! It was not one Romerist stone only but three at least that at this instant, directed with unerring aim, pierced the sides of the paper monster, allowing the hot air, the

vital current, to escape through the wounds. The balloon contracted, shriveled up like a worm when it is trodden upon, and finally, doubling over in the middle, gave itself up a prey to the devouring flames lighted by the fuse which in a second's space enveloped it in a fiery mantle.

At the same moment that the balloon of the official candidate expired thus miserably, the little Romerist balloon, its swelling sides daubed with coarse designs, rose promptly and swiftly from a corner of the plaza, resolved not to pause in its ascent until it had reached the clouds.

XIV.

NIEVES spent a restless night and when she awoke in the morning the incidents of the preceding evening presented themselves to her mind vaguely and confusedly as if she had dreamed them; she could not believe in the reality of Segundo's singular hardihood, that taking possession of her, that audacious outrage, that she had not known how to resent. How compromising the position in which the daring of the poet had placed her! And what if anyone had noticed it? When she bade good-night to the girls who had been sitting with her at the window, they had smiled in a way that was—well, odd; Carmen Agonde, the fat girl with the sleepy eyes and placid temper, gave evidence at times of a strain of malice. But, no; how could they have observed anything? The shawl she had worn was large and had covered her whole figure. And Nieves took the shawl, put it on and looked at herself in the mirror, using a handglass to obtain a complete view of her person, in order to assure herself that, enveloped in this garment, it was impossible for

an arm passed around her waist to be seen. She was engaged in this occupation when the door opened and someone entered. She started and dropped the glass.

It was her husband, looking more sallow than ever, and bearing the traces of suffering stamped on his countenance. Nieves' heart seemed to turn within her. Could it be possible that Don Victoriano suspected anything? Her apprehensions were soon relieved, however, when she heard him speak, with ill-disguised pique, of the insulting behavior of the Romerists and the destruction of the balloon. The Minister sought an outlet for his mortification by complaining of the pain of the pin-prick.

"But did you ever see the like, child? What do you think of it?" he said.

He then went on to complain of the noise of the fair, which had lasted all night and had not allowed him to close his eyes. Nieves agreed that it was extremely annoying; she, too, had been unable to sleep. The Minister opened the window and the noise reached them louder and more distinct. It resembled a grand chorale, or symphony, composed of human voices, the neighing of horses and mules, the grunting of pigs, the lowing of cows, calves, and oxen, hucksters' criers, noises of quarreling, songs,

blasphemies, and sounds of musical instruments. The flood-tide of the fair had submerged Vila morta.

From the window could be seen its waves, a surging sea of men and animals crowded together in inextricable confusion. Suddenly among the throng of peasants a drove of six or eight calves would rush with helpless terror; a led mule had cleared a space around him, dealing kicks to right and left, screams and groans of pain were heard on all sides, but those behind continued pushing those in front and the space was filled up again. The venders of felt hats were a curious sight as they walked about with their merchandise on their heads, towers of twenty or thirty hats piled one above another, like Chinese pagodas. Other venders carried for sale, on a portable counter slung from their necks by ribbons, balls of thread, tape, thimbles, and scissors; the venders of distaffs and spindles carried their wares suspended around their waists, from their breast, everywhere, as unskillful swimmers carry bladders, and the venders of frying-pans glittered in the sun like feudal warriors.

The confused din, the ceaseless movement of the multitude, and the mingling together of human beings and animals, made the brain dizzy, and the

ear was wearied by the plaintive lowing of the cows under the drivers' lash, the terrified cries of women, the brutal hilarity of drunken men who issued from the taverns with hats pushed far back on their heads, seeking an outlet for their superabundant energy by assaulting the men or pinching the girls. The latter, screaming with terror, escaped from the drunkards to fall, perhaps, on the horns of some ox or to receive a blow from the snout of some mule that bathed their foreheads and temples in its frothy saliva. But most terrifying of all was it to see infants carried high above their mothers' heads, braving, like frail skiffs, the dangers of this stormy sea.

Nieves remained for half an hour or so looking out of the window, and then, sight and hearing both weary, she withdrew. In the afternoon she watched the scene again for a while. The buying and selling was less brisk, and the better classes of the Border began to make their appearance at the fair. Agonde, who, absorbed in the desperate gambling that went on in the back shop, had kept himself invisible during the day, now went upstairs and, while he wiped the perspiration from his brow, pointed out to Nieves the notabilities of the place, as they passed by, naming to her in turn the arch-

priests, the parish priests, the physicians, and the gentry.

“That very thin man, riding that horse that looks as if it had been strained through a colander, with silver trimmings in his saddle and silver spurs, is Señorito de Limioso, a scion of the house of the Cid—God save the mark! The Pazo of Limioso is situated in the neighborhood of Cebre. As for money, they have not an *ochavo*; they own a few barley-fields, and a couple of grapevines past yielding, that bring them in a trifle. But do you suppose that Señorito de Limioso would go into an inn to dine? No, Señora; he carries his bread and cheese in his pocket, and he will sleep—Heaven knows where. As he is a Carlist they may let him stretch himself on the floor of Doña Eufrasia’s back shop, with the saddle of his nag for a pillow, for on a day like this there are no mattresses to spare. And you may be sure that his servant’s belt bulges out in the way it does, because he carries the nag’s feed in it.”

“You exaggerate, Agonde.”

“Exaggerate? No, indeed. You have no idea what those gentlemen are. Here they are called *Seven on a horse*, because they have one horse for all seven which they ride in pairs, in turn, and when

they are near the town they stop to ride in, one by one, armed with whip and spur, and the nag comes in seven different times, each time with a different rider. Why, see those ladies coming there, the one on a donkey, the other on a mule—the *Señoritas de Loiro*. They are friends of the *Molendes*. Look at the bundles they carry before them; they are the dresses for to-night's ball."

"But are you really in earnest?"

"In earnest? Yes, indeed, *Señora*. They have them all here, every article—the bustle, or whatever it may be called, that sticks out behind, the shoes, the petticoats, and even the rouge. And those are very refined, they come to the town to dress themselves; most of the young ladies, a few years ago, used to dress themselves in the pine wood near the echo of *Santa Margarita*. As they had no house in the town to stay at, and they were not going to lose the ball, at half-past ten or eleven they were among the pines, hooking their low-necked dresses, fastening on their bows and their gewgaws, and as fine as you please. All the gentry together, *Nieves*, if you will believe me, could not make up a dollar among them. They are people that, to avoid buying lard, or making broth, breakfast on wine and water. They hang up the loaf of wheaten bread among the

rafters so that it may be out of reach and may last forever. I know them well—vanity, and nothing more.”

The apothecary spoke angrily, multiplying instances, and exaggerating them in the telling, with the rage of the plebeian who eagerly seizes an opportunity to ridicule the poor aristocracy, relating anecdotes of everyone of the ladies and gentlemen—stories of poverty more or less skillfully disguised. Don Victoriano laughed, remembering some of the stories, now become proverbial in the country, while Nieves, her anxiety set at rest by her husband's laughter, began to think without terror, with a certain secret complacency, rather, of the episodes of the fireworks. She had feared to see Segundo among the crowd, but, as the night advanced and the brilliant colors of the booths faded into the surrounding darkness, and lights began to appear, and the singing of the drunkards grew hoarser, her mind became tranquil, and the danger seemed very remote, almost to have disappeared. In her inexperience she had fancied at first that the poet's arm would leave its trace, as it were, on her waist, and that the poet would seize the first opportunity to present himself before her, exacting and impassioned, betraying himself and compromising her. But the day passed by,

serene and without incident, and Nieves experienced the inevitable impatience of the woman who waits in vain for the appearance of the man who occupies her thoughts. At last she remembered the ball. Segundo would certainly be there.

XV.

AND she adorned herself for the town ball with a certain illusion, with the same care as if she were dressing for a soirée at the palace of Puenteancha.

Naturally the gown and the ornaments were very different from what they would have been in the latter case, but they were selected with no less care and consideration—a gown of white China crêpe, high-necked, and without a train, trimmed with Valenciennes lace, that fell in clinging folds, whose simplicity was completed by long dark Suède gloves wrinkled at the wrist, reaching to the elbow. A black velvet ribbon, fastened by a diamond and sapphire horseshoe, encircled her neck. Her beautiful fair hair, arranged in the English fashion, curled slightly over the forehead.

She was almost ashamed of having selected this toilette when she crossed the muddy plaza, leaning on Agonde's arm, and heard the poor music, and found the entrance of the townhall crowded with country-people sitting on the floor, whom it was necessary to step over to reach the staircase. On

the landings ran the lees of the fair—a dark wine-colored rivulet. Agonde drew her aside.

“Don’t step there, Nieves; take care,” he said.

She felt repelled by this unsightly entrance, calling to mind the marble vestibule and staircase of the palace of Puenteancha, carpeted down the center, with plants arranged on either side. At the door of the apartment which she was now entering was a counter laden with cakes and confectionery, at which the wife of Ramon, the confectioner, holding in her arms the inevitable baby, presided, casting angry glances at the young ladies who had come to amuse themselves.

Nieves was given a seat in the most conspicuous part of the room, in front of the door. The white-washed walls were not very clean, nor was the red cloth which covered the benches very fresh, nor did the badly snuffed candles in the tin chandelier produce a brilliant illumination. Owing to the large number of people present the heat was almost insupportable. In the center of the apartment the men stood grouped together—the youth of Vilamorta, visitors to the springs, strangers, gamblers, and the gentry from the neighboring country, mingling in one black mass. Every time the band struck up anew, deafening the ear with its sonorous strains, the

indefatigable dancers would leave the group and hurry off in search of their partners.

Nieves watched the scene with amazement. The young ladies, with their large chignons and their clusters of curls, their faces daubed with coarse rice-powder, their bodices cut low around the throat, their long trains of cheap materials, continually trodden upon and torn by the heavy boots of the gallants, their clumsy, tastelessly arranged flowers, and their short-wristed gloves of thick kid, too small for their hands, all seemed to her strange and laughable. She remembered Agonde's descriptions, the toilet made in the pine grove, and fanned herself with her large black fan as if to drive off the pestilent air in which the whirl of the dance enveloped her. The dancers pursued their task earnestly, diligently, as if they were contending for a prize to be awarded to the one who should first get out of breath, moving, not with their own motion only, but impelled by the jostling, pushing, and crowding of those around them. And Nieves, accustomed to the elegant and measured dancing of the soirées, wondered at the courage and resolution displayed by the dancers of Vilamorta. Some of the girls, whose flounces had been torn by some gallant's boot-heel, turned up their skirts, quickly tore off the whole trimming,

rolled it into a ball, which they threw into a corner, and then returned, smiling and contented, to the arms of their partners. In vain the men wiped the perspiration from their faces; their collars and shirt-fronts grew limp, their hair clung to their foreheads; the silk bodices of the ladies began to show stains of perspiration, and the marks of their partners' hands. And the gymnastics continued, and the dust and the particles of perspiration vitiated the atmosphere, and the floor of the room trembled. There were handsome couples, blooming girls and gallant young men, who danced with the healthy gayety of youth, with sparkling eyes, overflowing with animation; and there were ridiculous couples, short men and tall women, stout women and beardless boys, a baldheaded old man and a stout, middle-aged woman. There were brothers who danced with their sisters through shyness, because they had not the courage to invite other young ladies to dance, and the secretary of the town council, married for many years to a rich Orensen who was old and very jealous, danced all the evening with his wife, dancing polkas and waltzes in the time of a *habanera* to keep from dying by asphyxiation.

When Nieves entered the ballroom, the other women looked at her, first with curiosity, then with

surprise. How strange to come so simply dressed! Not to wear a train a yard and a half long, nor a flower in her hair, nor bracelets nor satin shoes. Two or three ladies from Orense, who had cherished the expectation of making a sensation in the ball of Vilamorta, began to whisper among themselves, criticising the artistic negligence of her attire, the modesty of the white, high-necked bodice, and the grace of the small head, with its elegantly arranged hair, vaporous as the engravings in *La Ilustracion*. The Orensens determined to copy the fashion-plate, the Vilamortans and the women of the Border, on the contrary, criticised the Minister's lady bitterly.

"She is dressed almost as if she would dress at home."

"She does it because she doesn't want to wear her good clothes here. Of course for a ball here—— She thinks probably that we know nothing. But she might at least have dressed her hair a little better. And how easy it is to see that she is bored; look, why, she seems to be asleep."

"And a little while ago she seemed as if she couldn't sit still a moment—she kept tapping the floor with her foot as if she were impatient to be gone."

And it was true; Nieves was bored. And if the

young ladies who censured her could only have known the cause!

She could see Segundo nowhere, anxiously as she looked for him, at first with furtive glances, then openly and without disguise. At last García came to salute her, and then she could restrain herself no longer, and making an effort to speak in a natural and easy tone, she asked:

“And the boy? It is a wonder he is not here.”

“Who? Segundo? Segundo is—so eccentric. If you could only guess what he is doing now. Reading verses or composing them. We must leave him to his whims.”

And the lawyer waved his hands with a gesture that seemed to say that the eccentricities of genius must be respected, while in his own mind he said:

“He is most likely with that damned old woman.”

The truth is that nothing in the world would have induced the poet, under the circumstances, to come to a ball like the present one, to be obliged to dance with the young country girls of his acquaintance, to perspire and to be pulled about like the other young men. And his absence, the result of his æsthetic feeling, produced a marvelous effect on Nieves, effacing the last remnant of fear, stimulating her coquetish instincts, and piquing her curiosity.

At the same time, in the radical circle that surrounded Don Victoriano and his wife, the approaching departure of the Minister and Nieves for Las Vides to be present at the vintage was discussed—a project that delighted the Minister as an unexpected holiday delights a schoolboy. The persons whom the hidalgo had invited or intended to invite for the festive occasion were named, and when Agonde uttered Segundo's name Nieves raised her eyes, and a look of animation lighted up her face, while she said to herself:

“He is fully capable of not going.”

XVI.

A GREAT day for Las Vides is the day appointed by the town council for the inauguration of the vintage. The whole year is passed in looking forward to and preparing for the beautiful harvest time. The vine is still clothed in purple and gold, but it has already begun to drop a part of its rich garniture as a bride drops her veil, the wasps settle in clusters on the grapes, announcing to man that they are now ripe. The last days of September, serene and peaceful, are at hand. To the vintage without delay!

Neither Primo Genday nor Mendez takes a moment's rest. The bands of vintagers who come from distant parishes to hire themselves out must be attended to, must have their tasks assigned them; the work of gathering in the grapes must be organized so that it may be advantageously and harmoniously conducted. For the labors of the vintage resemble, somewhat, a great battle in which an extraordinary expenditure of energy is required from the soldier, a waste of muscle and of blood, but in which he

must be supplied, in return, with everything necessary to recruit his strength during his moments of repose. In order that the vintagers might engage in their arduous labors with cheerfulness and alacrity, it was necessary to have at hand in the cellar the cask of must from which the carters might drink at discretion when they returned exhausted from the task of carrying the heavy *coleiro*, or basket, filled with grapes up the steep ascents; it was necessary that they should have an abundant supply of the thick wine flavored with mutton suet, the sardines and the barley-bread, when the voracious appetite of the bands demanded them; to which end the fire was always kept burning on the hearth at Las Vides and the enormous kettles in which the mess was cooked were always kept filled.

When in addition to this the presence of numerous and distinguished guests be considered, some idea may be formed of the bustle of the manor-house during these incomparable days. Its walls sheltered, besides the Comba family, Saturnino and Carmen Agonde, the young and amiable curate of Naya, the portly arch-priest of Loiro, Tropiezo, Clodio Genday, Señorita de Limioso and the two Señoritas de Molende. Every class was here represented, so that Las Vides was a sort of microcosm or

brief compendium of the world of the province—the priests attracted by Primo Genday, the radicals by the head of the house of Mendez. And all these people of conditions so diverse, finding themselves associated together, gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the occasion in the greatest possible harmony and concord.

To the merriment of the vintagers the merriment of the guests responded like an echo. It was impossible to resist the influence of the Bacchic joyousness, the delirious gayety which seemed to float in the atmosphere. Among all the delightful spectacles which Nature has to offer, there is none more delightful than that of her fruitfulness in the vintage time, the baskets heaped full of clusters of ruddy or dark red grapes, which robust men, almost naked, like fauns, carry and empty into the vat or wine-press; the laughter of the vintagers hidden among the foliage, disputing, challenging each other from vine to vine to sing, a gayety which is followed by a reaction at nightfall—as is usually the case with all violent expressions of feeling in which there is a great expenditure of muscular strength; the merry challenges ending in some prolonged Celtic wail, some plaintive *a-lad-lad*. The pagan sensation of well-being, the exhilaration produced by the pure air

of the country, the mere joy of existence, communicated themselves to the spectators of these delightful scenes, and at night, while the chorus of fauns and Bacchantes danced to the sound of the flute and the timbrel, the gentry diverted themselves with childish frolics in the great house.

The young ladies slept all together in a large, bare apartment, the Rosary-room, the male guests being lodged by Mendez in another spacious room called the screen-room, because in it was a screen, as ugly as it was antique; the arch-priest only being excluded from this community of lodging, his obesity and his habit of snoring making it impossible for any person of even average sensibility tolerate him as a roommate; and the gay and mischievous party being thus divided into two sections, there came to be established between them a sort of merry warfare, so that the occupants of the Rosary-room thought of nothing but playing tricks on the occupants of the screen-room, from which resulted innumerable witty inventions and amusing skirmishes. Between the two camps there was a neutral one—that of the Comba family, whose slumbers were respected and who were exempt in the matter of practical jokes, although the feminine band often took Nieves as their confidante and counselor.

“Nieves, come here, Nieves; see, how foolish Carmen Agonde is; she says she likes the arch-priest, that barrel, better than Don Eugeniño, the parish priest of Naya, because it makes her laugh, she says, to see him perspiring and to look at the rolls of fat in the back of his neck. And say, Nieves, what trick shall we play to-night on Don Eugeniño? And on Ramon Limioso, who has been daring us all day?”

It was Teresa Molende, a masculine-looking black-eyed brunette, a good specimen of the mountaineer, who spoke thus.

“They must pay for the trick they played on us yesterday,” added her sister Elvira, the sentimental poetess.

“What was that?”

“You must know that they locked Carmen up. They are the very mischief! They shut her up in Mendez’s room. What is there that they won’t think of! They tied her hands behind her back with a silk handkerchief, tied another handkerchief over her mouth, so that she couldn’t scream, and left her there like a mouse in a mouse-trap. And we, hunting and hunting for Carmen, and no Carmen to be seen. And there we were thinking all sorts of things until Mendez went up to his room to go to bed and

found her there. Of course they had that silly creature to deal with, for if it had been I——”

“They would shut you up too,” declared Carmen.

“Me!” exclaimed the Amazon, drawing up her portly figure. “They would be the ones to get shut up!”

“But they entrapped me into it,” affirmed Carmen, looking as if she were just ready to cry. “See, Nieves, they said to me: ‘Put your hands behind you, Carmiña, and we’ll put a five-dollar piece in them,’ and I put them behind me, and they were so treacherous as to tie them together.”

Nieves joined in the laughter of the two sisters. It could not be denied that this simplicity was very amusing. Nieves seemed to be in a new world in which routine, the worn-out conventionalities of Madrid society, did not exist. True, such noisy and ingenuous diversions might at times verge on impropriety or coarseness, but sometimes they were really entertaining. From the moment the guests rose from table in the afternoon nothing was thought of but frolic and fun. Teresa had proposed to herself not to allow Tropiczo to eat a meal in peace, and with the utmost dexterity she would catch flies on the wing, which she would throw slyly into his soup, or she would pour vinegar into his glass instead of wine,

or rub pitch on his napkin so that it might stick to his mouth. For the arch-priest they had another trick—they would draw him on to talk of ceremonies, a subject on which he loved to expatiate, and when his attention was engaged, take away his plate slyly, which was like tearing a piece of his heart out of his breast.

At night, in the parlor of the turbid mirrors, in which were the piano and the rocking-chairs, a gay company assembled; they sang fragments of *El Juramento*, and *El Grumete*; they played at hide-and-seek, and, without hiding, played *brisca* with *malilla* counters; when they grew tired of cards, they had recourse to forfeits, to mind-reading, and other amusements. And the frolicsome rustic nature once aroused, they passed on to romping games—fool in the middle, hoodman-blind, and others which have the zest imparted by physical exercise—shouts, pushes and slaps.

Then they would retire to their rooms, still excited by their sports, and this was the hour when their merriment was at its height, when they played the wildest pranks; when they fastened lighted tapers to the bodies of crickets and sent them under the bedroom doors; when they took the slats out of Tropiezo's bedstead so that when he lay down he

might fall to the ground and bruise his ribs. In the halls could be heard smothered bursts of laughter and stealthy footsteps, white forms would be seen scurrying away, and doors would be hastily locked and barricaded with articles of furniture, while from behind them a mellow voice could be heard crying:

“They are coming!”

“Fasten the door well, girls! Don’t open, not if the king himself were to knock!”

XVII.

SEGUNDO was the last of the guests to arrive at Las Vides. As he cared but little for games and as Nieves did not take any very active part in them either, they would often have found themselves thrown for society upon each other had it not been for Victorina, who, from the moment Segundo appeared, never left her mother's side, and Elvira Molende who, from the very instant of his arrival, clung to the poet like the ivy to the wall, directing on him a battery of sighs and glances, and treating him to sentimental confidences and rhapsodies sweet enough to surfeit a confectioner's boy. From the moment in which Segundo set foot in Las Vides, Elvira lost all her animation, and assumed a languishing and romantic air, which made her cheeks appear hollower and the circles under her eyes deeper than ever. Her form acquired the melancholy droop of the willow and, giving up sports and pranks, she devoted herself exclusively to the Swan.

As it was moonlight, and the evenings were enjoyable out of doors, as soon as the sun had set, and

the labors of the day were ended, and the vintagers assembled for a dance, some of the guests would assemble together also in the garden, generally at the foot of a high wall bordered with leafy camellias, or they would stop and sit down for a chat at some inviting spot on their way home from a walk. Elvira knew by heart a great many verses, both good and bad, generally of a melancholy kind—sentimental and elegiac; she was familiar with all the flowers of poetry, all the tender verses which constituted the poetic wealth of the locality, and uttered by her thin lips, in the silvery tones of her gentle voice, with the soft accents of her native land, the Galician verses, like an Andalusian moral maxim in the sensual mouth of a gypsy, had a peculiar and impressive beauty—the sensibility of a race crystallized in a poetic gem, in a tear of love. These plaintive verses were interrupted at times by mocking bursts of laughter, as the gay sounds of the castanets strike in on the melancholy notes of the bagpipes. The poems in dialect acquired a new beauty, their freshness and sylvan aroma seemed to augment by being recited by the soft tones of a woman's voice, on the edge of a pine wood and under the shadow of a grapevine, on a serene moonlight night; and the rhyme became a vague and dreamy melopœia, like that of certain

German ballads; a labial music interspersed with soft diphthongs, tender *ñ*'s, *x*'s of a more melodious sound than the hissing Castilian *ch*. Generally, after the recitations came singing. Don Eugenio, who was a Borderer, knew some Portuguese *fados*, and Elvira was unrivaled in her rendering of the popular and melancholy song of Curros, which seems made for Druidical nights, for nights illuminated by the solemn light of the moon.

Segundo's heart thrilled with gratified vanity when Elvira recited shyly, in alternation with the verses of the popular and admired poets of the country, songs of the Swan, which had appeared in periodicals of Vigo or Orense. Segundo had never written in dialect, and yet Elvira had a book in which she pasted all the productions of the unknown Swan; Teresa, joining in the animated conversation with the best intentions in the word, betrayed her sister:

"She writes verses too. Come, child, recite something of your own. She has a copy-book full of things invented, composed by herself."

The poetess, after the indispensable excuses and denials, recited two or three little things, almost without poetic form, weak, sincere in the midst of their sentimental falseness—verses of the kind which

reveal no artistic faculty, but which are the sure indication that the author or authoress feels an unsatisfied desire, longs for fame or for love, as the inarticulate cry of the infant expresses its hunger. Segundo twisted his mustache, Nieves lowered her eyes and played with the tassels of her fan, impatient and somewhat bored and nervous. This occurred two or three days after the arrival of Segundo who, in spite of all his attempts, had not yet been able to succeed in saying a word in private to Nieves.

“How uncultured these young ladies are!” said Señora de Comba to herself, while aloud she said, “How lovely, how tender! It sounds like some of Grilo’s verses.”

XVIII.

IT was something different from poetry that formed the theme of conversation of the head of the house of Las Vides, the Gendays, and the arch-priest, installed on the balcony under the pretext of enjoying the moonlight, but in reality to discuss the important question of the vintage.

A fine crop! Yes, indeed, a fine crop! The grape had not a trace of oïdium; it was clean, full, and so ripe that it was as sticky to the touch as if it had been dipped in honey. There was not a doubt but that the new wine of this year was better than the old wine of last year. Last year's vintage was an absolute failure! Hail to-day, rain to-morrow! The grape with so much rain had burst before it was time to gather it, and had not an atom of pulp; the result was a wine that scarcely left a stain on the shirt-sleeves of the muleteers.

At the recollection of so great a calamity, Mendez pressed his thin lips together, and the arch-priest breathed hard. And the conversation continued, sustained by Primo Genday, who, with much ver-

bosity, spitting and laughter, recounted details of harvests of twenty years before, declaring:

“This year’s crop is exactly like the crop of ’61.”

“Exactly,” assented Mendez. “As for the Rebeco, it will not give a load less this year, and the Grilloa—I don’t know but that it will give us six or seven more. It is a great vine, the Grilloa!”

After these cheerful prognostications of a rich harvest, Mendez described with satisfaction to his attentive audience some improvements which he had introduced into the cultivation of the vine. He had most of his casks secured with iron hoops; they were more expensive than wooden ones, but they lasted longer and they saved the troublesome labor of making new hoops for each harvest; he was thinking too, by way of experiment, of setting up a wine-press, doing away with the repulsive spectacle of the trampling of the grapes by human feet, and in order that the pressed skins and the pulp of the grapes might not go to waste, he would distill from them a refined alcohol which Agonde would buy from him at its weight in gold.

Lulled by the grave voices discussing important agricultural questions on the balcony, Don Victoriano, somewhat fatigued by his expedition to the vineyards, sat smoking in the rocking-chair, buried

in painful meditations. Since his return from the springs he had been growing weaker day by day; the temporary improvement had vanished; the debility, the unnatural appetite, the thirst, and the desiccation of the body had increased. He remembered that Sanchez del Abrojo had told him that a slight perspiration would be of the greatest benefit to him, and when he observed, after he had been drinking the waters for a few days, the re-establishment of this function, his joy knew no bounds. But what was his terror when he found that his shirt, stiff and hard, adhered to his skin as if it had been soaked in syrup. He touched a fold of the sleeve with his lips and perceived a sweetish taste. It was plain! He perspired sugar! The glucose secretion was, then, uncontrollable, and by a tremendous irony of fate all the bitterness of his existence had come to end in this strange elaboration of sweet substances.

For some days past he had noticed another alarming symptom. His sight was becoming affected. As the aqueous humor of the eye dried up the crystalline lens became clouded, producing the cataract of diabetes. Don Victoriano had chills. He regretted now having put himself into the homicidal hands of Tropiezo and drunk the waters. There

was not a doubt but that he was being wrongly treated. From this day forth a strict regimen, a diet of fruits, fecula, and milk. To live, to live, but for a year, and to be able to hide his malady! If the electors saw their candidate blind and dying, they would desert to Romero. The humiliation of losing the coming election seemed to him intolerable.

Bursts of silvery laughter, and youthful exclamations proceeding from the garden, changed the current of his thoughts. Why was it that Nieves did not perceive the serious condition of her husband's health? He wished to dissemble before the whole world, but before his wife—— Ah, if his wife belonged to him she ought to be beside him now, consoling and soothing him by her caresses instead of diverting herself and frolicking among the camellias, like a child. If she was beautiful and fresh and her husband sickly, so much the worse for her. Let her put up with it, as was her duty. Bah! What nonsense! Nieves did not love him, had never loved him!

The noise and laughter below increased. Victorina and Teresa, the verses being exhausted, had proposed a game of hide-and-peek. Victorina was crying at every moment, "Teresa's it!" "Segundo's it!"

The garden was very well adapted for this exercise because of its almost labyrinthine intricacy, owing to the fact of its being laid out in sloping terraces supported on walls and separated by rows of umbrageous trees, communicating with each other by uneven steps, as is the case with all the estates in this hilly country. Thus it was that the play was very noisy, as the seeker had great difficulty in finding those who were hiding.

Nieves endeavored to hide herself securely, through laziness so as not to have to run after the others. Chance provided her with a superb hiding-place, a large lemon tree situated at one end of a terrace, near some steps which afforded an easy means of escape. She hid herself here in the densest part of the foliage, drawing her light gown closely around her so that it might not betray her. She had been only a few moments in her hiding-place when a shadow passed before her and a voice murmured softly :

“Nieves!”

“Oh!” she cried, startled. “Who has found me out here?”

“No one has found you; there is no one looking for you but me,” cried Segundo vehemently, penetrating into Nieves’ hiding-place with such impetuosity

that the late blossoms which whitened the branches of the giant tree showered their petals over their heads, and the branches swayed rhythmically.

"For Heaven's sake, García!" she cried, "for Heaven's sake, don't be imprudent—go away, or let me go. If the others should come and find us here what would they say? For Heaven's sake, go!"

"You wish me to go?" said the poet. "But, Señora, even if they should find me here, there would be nothing strange in that; a little while ago I was with Teresa Molende behind the camellias there; either we are playing or we are not playing. But if you desire it—to please you—— But before I go I wish to ask you a question——"

"Somewhere else—in the parlor," stammered Nieves, lending an anxious ear to the distant noises and cries of the game.

"In the parlor! Surrounded by everybody! No, that cannot be. No, now, do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," she returned in a voice rendered almost inaudible by terror.

"Well, then, I adore you, Nieves; I adore you, and you love me."

"Hist! Silence, silence! They are coming. I think I hear steps."

“No, it is the leaves. Tell me that you love me and I will go.”

“They are coming! For Heaven’s sake! I shall die of terror! Enough of jesting, García, I entreat you——”

“You know perfectly well that I am not jesting. Have you forgotten the night of the fireworks? If you did not love me you would have released yourself from my arm on that night, or you would have cried out. You look at me sometimes—you return my glances. You cannot deny it!”

Segundo was close to Nieves, speaking with fiery impetuosity, but without touching her, although the fragrant, rustling branches of their shelter closed around them, inviting them to closer proximity. But Segundo remembered the cold hard whale-bones, and Nieves drew back, trembling. Yes, trembling with fear. She might cry out, indeed, but if Segundo persisted in remaining how annoying it would be! What a mortification! What gossip it would give rise to! After all the poet was right—the night of the fireworks she had been culpably weak and she was paying for it now. And what would Segundo do if she gave him the *yes* he asked for? He repeated his proud and vehement assertion:

"You love me, Nieves. You love me. Tell me that you love me, only once, and I will go."

Not far off could be heard the contralto voice of Teresa Molende calling to her companions:

"Nieves—where is she? Victorina, Carmen, come in, the dew is falling!"

And another shrill voice, that of Elvira, woke the echoes:

"Segundo! Segundo! We are going in!"

In fact that almost imperceptible mizzle, which refreshes the sultry nights of Galicia, was falling; the lustrous leaves of the lemon tree in which Nieves sat, shrinking back from Segundo, were wet with the night dew. The poet leaned toward her and his hands touched her hands chilled with cold and terror. He crushed them between both his own.

"Tell me that you love me, or——"

"But, good Heavens, they are calling me! They are noticing my absence. I am cold!"

"Tell me the truth then. Otherwise there is no human power that can tear me from here—come what will. Is it so hard to say a single word?"

"And what do you want me to say, tell me?"

"Do you love me, yes or no?"

"And you will let me go—go to the house?"

"Anything you wish—but first tell me, do you love me?"

The *yes* was almost inaudible. It was an aspiration, a prolonged *s*. Segundo crushed her wrists in his grasp.

"Do you love me as I love you? Answer plainly."

This time Nieves, making an effort, pronounced an unequivocal *yes*. Segundo released her hands, raised his own to his lips with a passionate gesture of gratitude, and springing down the stairs, disappeared among the trees.

XIX.

NIEVES drew a long breath. She felt dazed. She shook her wrists, hurt by the pressure of Segundo's fingers, and arranged her hair, wet with the night dew, and disordered by the contact of the branches. What had she said after all? Anything, no matter what, to escape from so compromising a situation. She was to blame for having withdrawn from the others and hidden herself in so retired a spot. And with that desire to give publicity to unimportant actions which seizes people when they have something to conceal she called out :

"Teresa! Elvira! Carmen! Carmen!"

"Nieves! where are you, Nieves?" came in answer from various quarters.

"Here, beside the big lemon tree. Wait for me, I am coming!"

When they entered the house, Nieves, who had to some extent recovered her composure, began to reflect on what had passed and could not but wonder at herself. To say *yes* to Segundo. She had uttered the word partly under compulsion, but she

had uttered it. How daring the poet had been. It seemed impossible that the son of the lawyer of Vilamorta should be so determined. She was a lady of distinction, highly respected, her husband had just been Minister. And García's family, what were they—nobodies; the father wore collars frayed at the edges that were a sight to see; they kept no servant; the sisters ran about barefooted half the time. Even Segundo himself—he had an unmistakable provincial air and a strong Galician accent. He could not indeed be called ugly; there was something remarkable in his face and in his manner. He spoke with so much passion! As if he commanded instead of entreating! What a masterful air he had! And there was something flattering to one's vanity in having a suitor of this kind, so ardent and so daring. Who had ever fallen in love with Nieves before? There were three or four who had made gallant speeches to her—one who had watched her through his opera-glass. Everyone in Madrid treated her with that indifference and consideration which respectable ladies inspire.

For the rest, this persistency of Segundo's was to a certain extent compromising. Would people notice it? Would her husband notice it? Bah! Her husband thought only of his ailments, of the elec-

tions. He scarcely ever spoke to her of anything else. But what if he should notice it? How horrible, good Heavens! And the girls who had been playing hide and seek, might they not suspect something? Elvira seemed more languishing and sighed more frequently than usual. Elvira admired Segundo. He—no, he did not pay the slightest attention to her. And Segundo's verses sounded well, they were beautiful; they were worthy of a place in *La Ilustracion*. In short, as they would be obliged to return to Madrid before the elections, there was hardly any real danger. She would always preserve a pleasant recollection of the summer. The thing was to avoid—to avoid——

Nieves did not venture to tell herself what it was necessary to avoid, nor had she settled this point when she entered the parlor, where the game of tresillo was already going on. Señora de Comba seated herself at the piano and played several quick airs—polkas and rigadoons, for the girls to dance. When she stopped they cried out for another air.

“Nieves, the *muñeira*!”

“The *riveirana*, please!”

“Do you know the whole of it, Nieves?”

“The whole of it—why, did I not hear it in the feasts?”

"Let us have it then, come."

"Who will dance it?"

"Who knows how to dance it?"

Several voices answered immediately:

"Teresa Molende; ah! it is a pleasure to see her dance it."

"And who will be her partner?"

"Ramonciñe Limioso here, he dances it to perfection."

Teresa laughed in the deep, sonorous tones of a man, declaring solemnly that she had forgotten the *muñeira*—that she never knew it well. From the *tresillo* table came a protest—from the master of the house, Mendez: Teresina danced it to perfection. Let her not try to excuse herself; no excuse would avail her; there was not in all the Border a girl who danced the *riveirana* with more grace; it was true indeed that the taste and the skill for these old customs of the country were fast disappearing.

Teresa yielded, not without once more affirming her incompetence. And after fastening up her skirt with pins, so that it might not impede her movements she stopped laughing and assumed a modest and ingenuous air, veiling her large lustrous eyes under her thick lashes, dropping her head on her breast, letting her arms fall by her sides, swaying

them slightly, rubbing the balls of the thumbs and the forefingers together, and thus, moving with very short steps, her feet close together, keeping time to the music, she made the tour of the room, with perfect decorum, her eyes fixed on the floor, stopping finally at the head of the room. While this was taking place, Señorito de Limioso took off his short jacket, remaining in his shirt-sleeves, put on his hat, and asked for an indispensable article.

“Victorina, the castanets.”

The child ran and brought two pairs of castanets. The Señorito secured the cord between his fingers and after a haughty flourish, began his rôle. Teresita's partner was as lean and shriveled as Don Quixote himself, and, like the Manchego hidalgo, it was undeniable that he had a distinguished and stately air, scrupulously as he imitated the awkward movements of a rustic. He took his place before Teresa and danced a quick measure, courteously but urgently wooing her to listen to his suit. At times he touched the floor with the sole of his foot, at others with his heel or toe only, almost twisting his ankles out of joint with the rapidity of his movements, while he played the castanets energetically, the castanets in Teresa's hands responding with a faint and timid tinkle.

Pushing his hat back on his head the gallant looked boldly at his partner, approached his face to hers; pursued her, urged his suit in a thousand different ways, Teresa never altering her humble and submissive attitude nor he his conquering air, his gymnastics, and his resolute movements of attack.

It was primitive love, the wooing of the heroic ages, represented in this expressive Cantabrian dance, warlike and rude; the woman dominated by the strength of the man and, better than enamored, afraid; all which was more piquant in view of the Amazon-like type of Teresa and the habitual shyness and circumspection of the Señorito. There was an instant, however, in which the gallant peeped through the barbarous conqueror, and in the midst of a most complicated and rapid measure he bent his knee before the beauty, describing the figure known as *punto del sacramento*. It was only for a moment however; springing to his feet he gave his partner a tender push and they stood back to back, touching each other, caressing each other, and amorously rubbing shoulder against shoulder and spine against spine. In two minutes they suddenly drew apart and with a few complicated movements of the ankles and a few rapid turns, during which Teresa's skirts whirled around her, the riveirana came to an

end and a storm of applause burst from the spectators.

While the Señorito wiped the perspiration from his brow and Teresa unpinned her skirt, Nieves, who had risen from the piano, looked around and noticed Segundo's absence. Elvira made the same observation but aloud. Agónde gave them the clew to the mystery.

"No doubt he is at this moment in the pine grove or on the river-bank. There is scarcely a night in which he does not make eccentric expeditions of the kind; in Vilamorta he does the same thing."

"And how is the door to be closed if he does not come? That boy is crazy," declared Primo Genday. "We are not all going to do without our sleep, we who have to get up early to our work, for that featherhead. Hey, do you understand me? I will shut up the house and let him manage in the best way he can. Ave Maria!"

Mendez and Don Victoriano protested in the name of courtesy and hospitality, and until midnight the door of Las Vides remained open, awaiting Segundo's return. As he had not come by that time, however, Genday went himself to bar the door muttering between his teeth:

“Ave Mar— Let him sleep out of doors if he has a fancy for doing so.”

Segundo, in fact, was at this time on his way to the pine grove. He was in a state of intense excitement, and he felt that it would be impossible for him in his present mood to meet anyone or to take part in any conversation. Nieves, so reserved, so beautiful, had said yes to him. The dreams of an ideal love which had tormented his spirit were not, then, destined never to be realized, nor would fame be unattainable when love was already within his ardent and eager grasp. With these thoughts passing through his mind he ascended the steep path and walked enraptured through the pine grove. At times he would lean against the dark trunk of some pine, his brow bared to the breeze, drinking in the cool night air, and listening, as in a dream, to the mysterious voices of the trees and the murmur of the river that ran below. Ah, what moments of happiness, what supreme joys, were promised him by this love, which flattered his pride, excited his imagination and satisfied his egotism, the delicate egotism of a poet, avid of love, of enjoyments which the imagination idealizes and the muse may sing without degradation! All that he had pictured in his verses was to be realized in his life; and his song would

ring forth more clearly and inspiration would flow more freely, and he would write, in blood, verses that would cause his readers' hearts to thrill with emotion.

In defiance of duty and reason Nieves loved him—she had told him so. The poet smiled scornfully when he thought of Don Victoriano, with the profound contempt of the idealist for the practical man inept in spiritual things. Then he looked around him. The pine grove had a gloomy air at this hour. And it was cold. Besides it must be late. They would be wondering at his absence in Las Vides. Had Nieves retired? With these thoughts passing through his mind he descended the rugged path and reached the door ten minutes after the careful hand of Genday had secured the bolt. The *contretemps* did not alarm Segundo; he would have to scale some wall; and the romance of the incident almost pleased him. How should he effect an entrance?

Undoubtedly the easiest way would be by the garden, into which he could lower himself from the brow of the hill—a question of a few scratches, but he would be in his own room in ten minutes' time, without encountering the dogs that were keeping watch in the yard, or any member of the household, as that side of the house, the side where the dining-

room was situated, was uninhabited. And upon this course he decided. He turned back and ascended the top of the hill, not without some difficulty. From thence he could command a view of the gallery and a good part of the garden. He studied the nature of the declivity, so as to avoid falling on the wall and perhaps breaking his leg. The hill was bare and without vegetation and the figure of the Swan stood out boldly against the background of the sky.

When Segundo fixed his eyes on the gallery for the purpose of deciding on the safest place for a descent, he saw something that troubled his senses with a sweet intoxication, something that gave him one of those delightful surprises which make the blood rush to the heart to send it coursing back joyful and ardent through the veins. In the semi-obscurity of the gallery, standing among the flower-pots, his keen gaze descried, without the possibility of a doubt as to the reality of the vision, a white figure, the silhouette of a woman, whose attitude seemed to indicate that she too had seen him, had observed him, that she was waiting for him.

Fancy swiftly sketched out and filled in the details of the scene—a colloquy, a divine colloquy of love with Nieves, among the carnations and the vines,

alone, without any other witnesses than the moon, already setting, and the flowers, envious of so much happiness. And with a swift movement he rolled down the steep declivity, landing on the hard wall. The fruit trees hid the path from him, and two or three times he lost his way; at last he found himself at the foot of the staircase leading to the gallery, and he raised his eyes to satisfy himself as to the reality of the lovely apparition. A woman dressed in white was indeed waiting there, leaning over the wooden balustrade of the balcony; but the distance did not now admit of any optical illusion; it was Elvira Molende, in a percale wrapper, her hair hanging loose about her shoulders, as if she were an actress rehearsing the rôle of *Sonnambula*. How eagerly the poor girl was leaning over the balustrade! The poet would swear that she even called his name softly, with a tender lisp.

And he passed on. He made the tour of the garden, entered the courtyard by the inner door, which was not closed at night, and knocked loudly at the door of the kitchen. The servant opened it for him, cursing to himself the young gentlemen who stayed up late at night because they were not obliged to rise early in the morning to open the cellar for the grape-tramplers.

XX.

As the time occupied in the gathering of the grapes and the elaboration of the wine in the spacious cellar of Mendez was so prolonged, and as in that part of the country everyone has his own crop, however small, to gather in, part of the guests went away, desirous of attending to their own vineyards. Señorito de Limioso needed to see for himself how, between oïdium, the blackbirds, the neighbors, and the wasps, not a single bunch of grapes had been left him; the Señoritas de Molende had to hang up with their own hands the grapes of their famous Tostado, renowned throughout the country; and for similar reasons Saturnino Agonde, the arch-priest, and the curate of Naya took their leave one by one, the court of Las Vides being reduced to Carmen Agonde, maid of honor, Clodio Genday, Aulic councillor, Tropiczo, court physician, and Segundo, who might well be the page or the troubadour charged to divert the châtelaine with his ditties.

Segundo was consumed with a feverish impatience hitherto unknown to him. Since the day of the in-

terview in the lemon tree Nieves had shunned every occasion of being alone with him; and the feverish dream that haunted his sleep, the intolerable anguish which consumed him, was that he had advanced no further than the fugitive *yes*, which he sometimes even doubted he had heard. He could not endure this slow torture, this ceaseless martyrdom; he would have been less unhappy if instead of encouraging him Nieves had requited his love with open scorn. It was not the brutal desire for positive victories which thus tormented him; all he wished was to convince himself that he was really loved, and that under that steely corset a tender heart throbbed. And so mad was his passion that when he found it impossible to approach Nieves, he was seized by an almost irresistible impulse to cry out, "Nieves, tell me again that you love me!" Always, always obstacles between the two; the child was always at her mother's side. Of what avail was it to be rid of Elvira Molende who, since the memorable night on which she had kept guard in the gallery, had looked at the poet with an expression that was half satirical, half mournful? The departure of the poetess removed an obstacle, indeed, but it did not put an end to his difficulties.

Segundo suffered in his vanity, wounded by the

systematic reserve of Nieves, as well as in his love, his ardent longing for the impossible. It was already October; the ex-Minister spoke of taking his departure immediately, and although Segundo counted on establishing himself in Madrid later on through his influence, and meeting Nieves again, an infallible instinct told him that between Nieves and himself there existed no other bond of union than their temporary sojourn in Las Vides, the poetic influences of the season, the accident of living under the same roof, and that if this dream did not take shape before their separation it would be as ephemeral as the vine leaves that were now falling around them, withered and sapless.

Autumn was parting with its glories; the wrinkled and knotted vine stalks, the dry and shrunken vine branches, lay bare to view, and the wind moaned sadly, stripping their leaves from the boughs of the fruit trees. One day Victorina asked Segundo:

“When are we going to the pine grove to hear it sing?”

“Whenever you like, child. This afternoon if your mother wishes it.”

The child conveyed the proposition to Nieves. For some time past Victorina had been more than usually demonstrative toward her mother, leaning

her head upon Nieves' breast, hiding her cheek in her neck, passing her hands over her hair and her shoulders while she would repeat softly, in a voice that seemed to ask for a caress:

“Mamma! mamma!”

But the eyes of the miniature woman, half-veiled by their long lashes, were fixed with loving, longing glance, not on her mother, but on the poet, whose words the child drank in eagerly, turning very red if he chanced to make some jesting remark to her or gave any other indication of being aware of her presence.

Nieves objected a little at first, not wishing to appear credulous or superstitious.

“But what has put such an idea into your head?”

“Mamma, when Segundo says that the pines sing, they sing, mamma, there is not a doubt of it.”

“But you don't know,” said Nieves, bestowing on the poet a smile in which there was more sugar than salt—“that Segundo writes poetry, and that people who write poetry are permitted to—to invent—a little?”

“No, Señora,” cried Segundo. “Do not teach your child what is not true. Do not deceive her. In society it often happens that we utter with the lips sentiments that are far from the heart, but in

poetry we lay bare the feelings of the inmost soul, feelings which in the world we are obliged to hide in our own breasts, through respect—or through prudence. Believe me.”

“Say, mamma, are we going there to-day?”

“Where?”

“To the pine grove.”

“If you are very anxious to go. What an obstinate child! But indeed I too am curious to hear this orchestra.”

Only Nieves, Victorina, Carmen, Segundo, and Tropiczo took part in the expedition. The elders remained behind smoking and looking on at the important operation of covering and closing some of the vats which contained the must, now fermented. As Mendez saw the party about to start, he called out in a tone of paternal warning:

“Take care with the descent. The pine needles in this hot weather are as slippery as if they had been rubbed with soap. The ladies must be helped down. You, Victorina, don’t be crazy; don’t go rushing about there.”

The famous pine grove was distant some quarter of a league, but they spent fully three-quarters of an hour in making the ascent, along a path as steep, narrow, and rugged as the ascent to heaven is said to

be, and which long before reaching the wood was carpeted with the polished, smooth, dry pine needles, which, if they rendered the descent more easy than was agreeable, compensated for it by making the ascent extremely difficult, causing the foot to slip, and fatiguing the ankles and the knees. Nieves stopped from time to time to take breath, and was at last fain to avail herself of the support of the plump arm of Carmen Agonde.

“*Caramba*, this is like practicing gymnastics! Whoever escapes being killed when we are going back will be very lucky.”

“Lean well on me, lean well on me,” said the sturdy country girl. “Many a limb has been broken here already, no doubt. This ascent is terrible!”

They reached the summit at last. The prospect was beautiful, with that species of beauty that borders on sublimity. The pine wood seemed to hang over an abyss. Between the trunks of the trees could be caught glimpses of the mountains, of an ashen blue blending into violet in the distance; on the other side of the pine wood, that which overlooked the river, the ground fell abruptly in a steep, almost perpendicular descent, while far below flowed the Avieiro, not winding peacefully along, but noisy and foaming, roused into rage by the barrier opposed

to its progress by some sharp black rocks and separating into numerous currents that curled around the boulders like angry green snakes covered with silver scales. To the roaring and sobbing of the river the pine wood kept accompaniment with its perpetual plaint intoned by the summits of the trees, which swayed and vibrated to the kisses of the breeze, dolorous kisses that drew from them an incessant moan.

The excursionists, impressed by the tragic aspect of the scene, remained mute. Only the child broke the silence, speaking in tones as hushed as if she were in a church.

"Well, it is true, mamma! The pines sing. Do you hear them? It sounds like the chorus of bishops in 'L'Africaine.' They even seem to speak—listen—in bass voices—like that passage in the 'Huguenots——'"

Nieves agreed that the murmur of the pines was in truth musical and solemn. Segundo, leaning against a tree, looked down at the river foaming below; Victorina approached him, but he stopped her and made her go back.

"No, my child," he said; "don't come near; it is a little dangerous; if you should lose your footing and roll down that declivity—— Go back, go back."

As nothing further occurred to them to say about the pines, the excursionists began to think of returning home; Nieves was a little uneasy about the descent, and she wished to undertake it before the sun should set.

"Now, indeed, we shall break some of our bones, Don Fermin," she said to the doctor. "Now, indeed, you may begin to get your bandages and splints ready."

"There is another road," said Segundo, emerging from his abstraction. "And one which is much less toilsome and much more level than this."

"Yes, talk to us now about the other road," cried Tropiezo, true to his habit of voting with the opposition. "It is even worse than the one by which we came."

"How should it be worse, man? It is a little longer, but as it is not so steep it is the best in the end. It skirts the pine wood."

"Do you want to tell me which is the best road—me who know the whole country as well as I know my own house? You cannot go by that road; I know what I am saying."

"And I say that you can, and I will prove it to you. For once in your life don't be stubborn. I came by it not many days ago. Do you remember,

Nieves, the night we played hide-and-seek in the garden, the night they barred me out and I got over the wall?"

Had it not been for the thick shade cast by the pine trees and the fading daylight, it would have been seen that Nieves blushed.

"Let us take whichever road is easiest and most level," she said, evading an answer. "I am very awkward about walking over rough roads."

Segundo offered his arm, saying jestingly:

"That blessed Tropiezo knows as much about roads as he does about the art of healing. Come, and you shall see that we will be the gainers by it."

Tropiezo, on his side, was saying to Carmen Agonde, shaking his head obstinately:

"Well, we will please ourselves and go by the cut, and arrive before they do, safe and sound, with the help of God."

Victorina, according to her custom, was going to her mother's side, when the doctor called out to her:

"Here, take hold of the end of my stick or you will slip. Your mamma will have enough to do to keep herself from falling. And God save us from a *trip*," he added, laughing loudly at his jest.

The voices and footsteps receded in the distance, and Segundo and Nieves continued on their way in

silence. The precipitous character of the path along which they walked inspired Nieves with something like fear. It was a little path cut on the slope of the pine wood, on the very edge of the precipice, almost overhanging the river. Although Segundo gave Nieves the least dangerous side, that next the wood, leaving himself scarcely a foothold, so that he was obliged to place one foot horizontally before the other, in walking, this did not set her fears at rest or make the adventure seem any the less dangerous to her. Her terror was increased a hundredfold when she saw that they were alone.

“Are they not coming?” she asked anxiously.

“We will overtake them in less than ten minutes. They are going by the other road,” answered Segundo, without adding a single word of endearment, or even pressing the arm which trembled with terror within his.

“Let us go on, then,” said Nieves, in tones of urgent entreaty. “I am anxious to be home.”

“Why?” asked the poet, suddenly standing still.

“I am tired—out of breath——”

“Well, you shall rest and take a drink of water if you desire it.”

And with rash hardihood Segundo, without waiting for an answer, drew Nieves down the slope and,

skirting the rock, stopped on a narrow ledge which projected over the river. By the fading sunset light they descried a crystal thread of water trickling down the black front of the rock.

“Drink, if you wish—in the palm of your hand, for we have no glass,” said Segundo.

Nieves mechanically released Segundo's arm, scarcely conscious of what she was doing, and took a step toward the stream; but the ground at the base of the rock, kept moist by the dripping of the water, was overgrown with humid vegetation as slippery as sea-weed, and as she set her foot upon it she slipped and lost her balance. In her vertigo, she saw the river roaring menacingly below, the sharp rocks waiting to receive her and mangle her flesh, and she already felt the chill air of the abyss. A hand clutched her by her gown, by her flesh, perhaps; held her up and drew her back to safety. She dropped her head on Segundo's shoulder and the latter, for the first time, felt Nieves' heart beat under his hand. And how quickly it beat! It beat with fear. The poet bent over her, and on her very lips breathed this question:

“Do you love me? tell me, do you love me?”

The answer was inaudible, for even if the words

had been formed in her throat her sealed lips were unable to articulate them. During this short space of time, which was for them an eternity, there flashed across Segundo's brain a thought potent and destructive as the electric spark. The poet stood fronting the precipice, Nieves with her back toward it, kept from falling over its edge only by the arm of her savior. A movement forward, a stronger pressure of his lips to hers, would be sufficient to make them both lose their balance and precipitate them into the abyss. It would be a beautiful ending—worthy of the ambitious soul of a poet. Thinking of it Segundo found it alluring and desirable, and yet the instinct of self-preservation, an animal impulse, but one more powerful than the romantic idea, placed between the thought and the action an insuperable barrier. He pleased himself, in imagination, with the picture of the two bodies clasped in each other's arms, borne along by the current of the river. He even saw in fancy the scene of the discovery of the corpses, the exclamations; the profound impression that such an event would cause in the district; and *something*, some poetic feeling that stirred and thrilled in his youthful soul, urged him to take the leap; but at the same time a cold fear

congealed his blood, obliging him to proceed slowly, not toward the abyss, but in an opposite direction, toward the path.

All this, short enough in the telling, was instantaneous in the thinking. Segundo felt a cold chill strike through him, putting to flight thoughts of love as well as of death. It was the chill communicated to him by the lips of Nieves, who had fainted in his arms.

He dipped his handkerchief in the spring and applied it to her temples and wrists. She half opened her eyes. They could hear Tropiezo talking, Carmen laughing; they were coming doubtless in search of them, to triumph over them. Nieves, when she came back to consciousness and found herself still alone, did not make the slightest effort to free herself from the poet's embrace.

XXI.

AS if by tacit agreement the hero and heroine of the adventure made light of the danger they had run, to their companions in the excursion in the first place, and afterward to the elders at Las Vides. Segundo observed a certain reticence regarding the particulars of the occurrence. Nieves, on the contrary, was more talkative than usual, speaking with nervous loquacity, going over the most insignificant details a hundred times. She had slipped; García had reached out his hand to her; she had caught it, and as she was—well—timid, she had been a little frightened, although there was not the slightest occasion for being so. But the obstinate Tropiezo, with mild scorn, contradicted her. Good Heavens, how mistaken she was! No danger? Why, it was only by a miracle that Nieves was not now floating in the Avieiro. The ground there was as slippery as soap, and the stones below were as sharp as razors, and the current was so strong that—— Nieves denied the danger, making an effort to laugh; but the terror of the accident had left unmistakable traces

upon her countenance, changing its warm healthy pal-
lor to a sickly hue, producing dark circles under her
eyes, and making her features twitch convulsively.

Segundo longed to say a few words to her, to ask
her to grant him an interview; he comprehended
that he must avail himself of these first moments,
while her soul was still under the softening influence
of gratitude and fright which made her cold heart
palpitate beneath the whalebone of her stays. In
the brief scene of the precipice the arrival of Tro-
piezo had allowed Nieves no time to respond ex-
plicitly to the poet's ardor, and Segundo wished to
come to some agreement with her, to devise some
means of seeing each other and talking to each other
alone, to establish the fact at once that all these
anxieties, these vigils, these intrigues, were love and
requited love—a mutual passion, in short. When
and how should he find the desired opportunity of
establishing an understanding with Nieves?

It may be said that in the history of every love
affair there exists a first period in which obstacles ac-
cumulate and difficulties, seemingly insurmountable,
arise, driving to despair the lover who has made up
his mind to conquer them, and that there comes,
too, a second period in which the mysterious force
of desire and the power of the will sweep away

these obstacles, and circumstances, for the moment favorable, aid the lovers. So it happened on the night of this memorable day. As Victorina had been somewhat frightened, hearing of the danger her mother had been in, she had been sent to bed early, and Carmen Agonde had remained with her to put her asleep by telling her stories. The principal witnesses being thus removed and the elders plunged in one of their interminable viticultural, agricultural, and sociological discussions, Nieves, who had gone out on the balcony for air—for she felt as if she had a lump in her throat which prevented her from breathing—had an opportunity to chat for ten minutes with Segundo, who was standing near the window, not far from the rocking-chairs.

Occasionally they would raise their voices and speak on indifferent subjects—the afternoon's accident, the strange singing of the pines. And low, very low, the diplomatic negotiation of the poet followed its course. An interview, a conversation with some degree of freedom. Why, of course it could be! Why could it not take place in the gallery that very night? No one was going to think of going there to spy out what was passing. He could let himself down easily into the garden—— He could not? She was very timid—— It would be wrong?

Why?—She was tired and not very well—— Yes, he understood. She would prefer the daytime, perhaps. Well, the other would be better, but—— Without fail? At the hour of the siesta? In the parlor? No; nobody ever went there; everyone was asleep. On her word of honor?—Thanks. Yes, it was necessary to dissemble so as not to attract attention.

Meantime the gentlemen at the tresillo table talked of the vintage and its consequences. The poor country girls earned a good deal of money at the work. Apropos of which Don Victoriano gave expression to some of his favorite ideas, referring to English legislature, and eulogizing the wisdom of that great nation whose laws regulating labor give evidence of a careful study of the problems it involves, and of some regard for the welfare of women and children. With these serious disquisitions the evening ended, every owl retiring to his olive tree.

Nieves, seated at her toilet table, her open dressing-case and a small silver-framed mirror before her, was taking out, one by one, the tortoise-shell hair-pins which fastened her hair. Mademoiselle gathered them together and arranged them neatly in a box and braided Nieves' hair, after which the latter

threw herself back in her seat and drew a deep breath; suddenly she looked up.

“If you could make me a cup of lime tea,” she said, “in your own room, without troubling anybody?”

The Frenchwoman left the room and Nieves leaned her elbow thoughtfully on the table, resting her cheek in the palm of her hand, without moving her eyes from the mirror. Her face was deathly pale. No, this life could not continue; if it did it would carry her to her grave. She was very nervous—what terrors! What anxiety, what moments of anguish she had suffered! She had seen death face to face, and had had more frights, more fears, more misery in a single day than in all the previous years of her existence put together. If this were love in truth there was little that was pleasing in it; such agitations were not suited to her. It was one thing to like to be pretty, and to be told so, and even to have a passionate adorer, and another to suffer these incessant anxieties, these surprises that bring one’s heart to one’s mouth and expose one to the risk of disgrace and destroy one’s health. And the poets say that this is happiness. It may be so for them—as for the poor women—— And why had she not the courage to tell Segundo that there must be an end

to this, to say to him: "I can endure these alarms no longer. I am afraid. I am miserable!" Ah, she was afraid of him, too. He was capable of killing her; his handsome black eyes sent forth at times electric sparks and phosphoric gleams. And then he always took the lead, he dominated her, he mastered her. Through him she had been on the point of falling into the river, of being dashed to pieces on the rocks. Holy Virgin! Why, only half an hour ago did he not almost force her to agree to a meeting in the gallery? Which would be a great piece of madness, since it would be impossible for her to go to that part of the house without her absence being noticed by Mademoiselle, or someone else, and its cause being discovered. Good Heavens! All this was terrible, terrible! And to-morrow she must go to the parlor at the hour of the siesta. Well, then, she would take a bold resolution. She would go, yes, but she would go to clear up this misunderstanding, to give Segundo some plain talk that would make him place some restraint upon himself; that he should love her, very good; she had no objection to that, that was well enough; but to compromise her in this way, that was a thing unheard of; she would entreat him to return to Vilamorta; they would soon go to Madrid. Ah, how

long that blessed Mademoiselle delayed with the lime tea.

The door opened to admit, not Mademoiselle, but Don Victoriano. There was nothing to surprise her in his appearance; he slept in a sort of cabinet near his wife's room and separated from it by a passage-way, and every night before retiring he gave a kiss to the child, whose bed was beside her mother's; nevertheless Nieves felt a chill creep over her, and she instinctively turned her back to the light, coughing to hide her agitation.

The truth was that Don Victoriano looked very serious, even stern. He had not indeed been very cheerful or communicative ever since his illness had assumed a serious character; but in addition to his air of dejection there was an indefinable something, a darker gloom on his face than usual, a cloud pregnant with storm. Nieves, observing that he did not approach the child's bed, cast down her eyes and affected to be occupied in smoothing her hair with the ivory comb.

"How do you feel, child? Have you recovered from your fright?" asked her husband.

"No; I am still a little—— I have asked for some lime tea."

"You did well. See, Nieves——"

"Well—well?"

"See, Nieves, we must go to Madrid at once."

"Whenever you wish. You know that I——"

"No, the thing is that it is necessary, indispensable. I must put myself seriously under treatment, child; for if things continue as they are now it will soon be all over with me. I had the weakness to put myself in the hands of that ass, Don Fermin. God forgive me for it! and I fear," he added, smiling bitterly, "that I have made a fatal mistake. Let us see if Sanchez del Abrojo will get me out of the scrape—I doubt it greatly."

"Heavens, how apprehensive you are!" exclaimed Nieves, breathing freely once more and availing herself of the resource offered to her by Don Victoriano's illness. "Anyone would think you had an incurable disease. When you are once in Madrid and Sanchez has you under his care—in a couple of months you will not even remember this trifling indisposition."

"Bravo! child, bravo! I don't wish to hurt your feelings or to seem unkind, but what you say proves that you neither look at me, nor care a straw about my health, nor pay any attention to me whatever, which—forgive me—is not creditable to you. My disease is a serious, a very serious one—it is a dis-

ease that carries people off in fine style. I am being converted into sugar, my sight is failing, my head aches, I have no blood left, and you, serene and gay, sporting about like a child. A wife who loved her husband would not act in this way. You have troubled yourself neither about the state of my body nor the state of my mind. You are enjoying yourself, having a fine time, and as for the rest—a great deal it matters to you!"

Nieves rose to her feet, tremulous, almost weeping.

"What are you saying? I—I——"

"Don't distress yourself, child; don't cry. You are young and well; I am wasted and sickly. So much the worse for me. But listen to me. Although I seem to you dry and serious, I loved you tenderly, Nieves, I love you still, as much as I love that child who is sleeping there, I swear it to you before God! And you might—you might love me a little—like a daughter—and take some interest in me. The trouble would not be for long now—I feel so sick."

Nieves drew near him with an affectionate movement and he touched her forehead with his parched lips, pressing her to him at the same time. Then he added:

"I have still another observation to make, another sermon to preach to you, child."

“What is it?” murmured his wife smiling, but terrified.

“That boy García—don’t be alarmed, child, there is no need for that—that boy looks at you sometimes in a very curious way, as if he were making love to you. No, I am not doubting you. You are and you have always been an irreproachable wife—I am not accusing you, nor do I attach any importance to such folly. But, although you may not believe it, the young men here are very daring; they are shyer in appearance than those of the capital, but they are bolder in reality. I spent my youthful years here, and I know them. I am only putting you on your guard so that you may keep that jackanapes within bounds. For the rest of the time we are to remain in this place, avoid those long walks and all those other rusticities which they indulge in here. A lady like you among these people is a sort of queen, and it is not proper that they should take the same liberties with you as with the *Señoritas de Molende* or others like them—but I have already told you that such a thought has not even crossed my mind. It is one thing that this village Swan should have fallen in love with you, and have given you his hand to help you over the rocks, and another that I should insult you, child!”

Shortly afterward Mademoiselle entered with the steaming cup of tea. And greatly Nieves needed it. Her nerves were in a state of the utmost tension. She was on the verge of a hysterical attack. She even felt nausea when she took the first few spoonfuls. Mademoiselle offered her some anti-hysterical drops. Nieves drank the remedy, and with a few yawns and two or three tears the attack passed off. She thought she would go to bed, and went into her bedroom. There she saw something which renewed her uneasiness—Victorina, instead of being asleep, lay with eyes wide open. She had probably heard every word of the conversation.

XXII.

SHE had in fact heard it all, from beginning to end. And the words of the conjugal dialogue were whirling around in her brain, mingling confusedly together, stamping themselves in characters of fire on her virgin memory. She repeated them to herself, she tried to understand their meaning, she weighed them, she drew conclusions from them.

No one can tell which is the precise moment that divides day from night, sleeping from waking, youth from maturity, and innocence from knowledge. Who can fix the moment in which the child, passing into adolescence, observes in herself that undefinable something which may perhaps be called consciousness of sex, in which vague presentiment is changed into swift intuition, in which, without an exact notion of the realities of life, she divines all that experience will corroborate and accentuate later on, in which she understands the importance of a sign, the significance of an act, the character of a relationship, the value of a glance, and the meaning of a reticence. The moment in which her eyes, hith-

erto open only to. external life, acquire power to scrutinize the inner life also, and losing their superficial brilliancy, the clear reflection of her ingenuous purity, acquire the concentrated and undefinable expression which constitutes the *glance of a grown person*.

This moment arrived for Victorina at the age of eleven, on the night we have mentioned, overhearing a dialogue between her father and mother. Motionless, with bated breath, her feet cold, her head burning, the child heard everything, and afterward, in the dim light of the bedroom, united broken links, remembering certain incidents, and at last understood without attaching much importance to what she understood, reasoning, however, with singular precocity, owing, perhaps, to the painful activity with which imagination works in the silence of night and the repose of the bed.

It is certain that the child slept badly, tossing about restlessly in her monastic little bed. Two ideas, especially, seemed to pierce her brain like nails. Her father was ill, very ill, and he was annoyed and displeased, besides, because Segundo had fallen in love with her mamma. With her mamma. Not with her ! With her who preserved all the flowers he had given her like relics,

The sorrows of childhood know neither limit nor consolation. When we are older and more storms have passed over us, and we have seen with astonishment that man can survive griefs which we had thought unsurvivable, and that the heavens do not fall because we have lost what we love, it may almost be said that absolute despair, which is the heritage of childhood, does not exist. It was evident to Victorina that her father was dying and that her mother was wicked, and Segundo a villain, and that the world had come to an end—and that she too, she too, desired to die. If it were possible for the hair to turn white at eleven, Victorina would have become white on the night in which suffering changed her from a bashful, timid, blushing child to a moral being, capable of the greatest heroism.

Nor did Nieves enjoy the balmy sweets of slumber. Her husband's words had made her thoughtful. Was Don Victoriano's illness a fatal one? It might be so! He looked greatly altered, poor fellow. And Nieves felt a touch of grief and apprehension. Why, who could doubt that she loved her husband, or that she should regret his death? She did not feel for him any passionate love, such as is described in novels—but affection—yes. Heaven grant the malady might be a trifling one. And if it

were not? And if she were to be left a wi—— She did not dare to complete the word even in her thoughts. To think of such a thing seemed like indulging in wicked desires. No, but the fact was that women, when their husbands die, were—Holy Virgin! It must be a terrible grief. Well, but *if it happened?* Segundo—Heavens, what folly! Most assuredly such an absurdity had never entered his head. The Garcías—nobodies. And here a vivid picture of all Segundo's relations and their manner of living presented itself to her mind.

She would willingly have absented herself from the rendezvous on the following day, because her husband had begun to suspect something and the situation was a compromising one, although in the place designated for the interview the meeting between them might always be attributed to chance. On the other hand if she failed to meet him, Segundo, who was so enamored, was fully capable of creating a scandal, of going to look for her in her room, of forcing an entrance into it through the window.

After all, thinking well over the matter, she judged it most prudent to comply with her promise and to entreat Segundo to—forget her—or at least

not to compromise her. That was the best course to pursue.

Nieves passed the morning in a state of complete prostration; she scarcely tasted a morsel at breakfast and during the meal she kept her eyes turned away from Segundo, fearing lest her husband should surprise some furtive glance of intelligence between them. To make matters worse, Segundo, desirous of reminding her with his eyes of her promise, looked at her on this day oftener than usual. Fortunately Don Victoriano's attention seemed to be all given to satisfying his voracious appetite for eating and drinking. The meal being finished everyone retired as usual to take the siesta. Nieves went to her room. She found Victorina there, lying on the bed. For greater precaution she asked her:

“Are you going to sleep the siesta, my pet?”

“To sleep, no. But I am comfortable here.”

Nieves looked at herself in the glass and saw that she was pale. She washed her teeth, and after satisfying herself by a rapid glance that her husband was resting in the other room, she stole softly into the parlor. She was trembling. This atmosphere of storm and danger, grateful to the sea-fowl, was fatal to the domestic bird. It was no life to be always

shuddering with fear, her blood curdled by fright. It was not to live. It was not to breathe. She would end by becoming crazy. Had she not fancied just now that she heard steps behind her, as if someone were following her? Two or three times she had stopped and leaned, fainting, against the wall of the corridor, vowing in her own mind that she would never put herself in such a dilemma again.

When she reached the parlor she stopped, half startled. It was so silent and drowsy in the semi-obscurity, with the half-closed shutters through which entered a single sunbeam full of dancing golden motes, with its sleepy mirrors that were too lazy to reflect anything from their turbid surfaces, its drowsy asthmatic clock, whose face looked like a human countenance watching her and coughing disapprovingly. Suddenly she heard quick, youthful foot-steps and Segundo, audacious, impassioned, threw himself at her feet and clasped his arms around her. She tried to restrain him, to advise him, to explain to him. The poet refused to heed her, he continued pouring forth exclamations of gratitude and love and then, rising to his feet, he drew her toward him with the irresistible force of a passion which does not stop to consider consequences.

When Don Victoriano saw the child enter his

room, white as wax, livid, almost, darting fire from her eyes, in one of those horror-inspired attitudes which can neither be feigned nor imitated, he sprang from the bed where he had been lying awake smoking a cigar. The child said to him, in a choking voice:

“Come, papa! come, papa!”

What were the thoughts that passed through her father's mind? It was never known why he followed his daughter without putting to her a single question. On the threshold of the parlor father and child paused. Nieves uttered a shrill scream and Segundo, with an impassioned and manly gesture, placed himself before her to shield her with his body. An unnecessary defense. In the figure of the man standing on the threshold there was nothing of menace; what there was in it to inspire terror was precisely its air of stupor and helplessness; it seemed a corpse, a specter overwhelmed with impotent despair—the face, green rather than sallow, the eyes opened, dull and fixed, the hands and feet trembling. The man was making fruitless efforts to speak; paralysis had begun with the tongue: he tried in vain to move it in his mouth, to form sounds. Horrible conflict! The words struggled for utterance but remained unuttered; his face changed from

livid to red, the blood becoming congested in it, and the child, clasping her father around the waist, seeing this combat between the spirit and the body, cried:

“Help! help! Papa is dying!”

Nieves, not daring to approach her husband, but comprehending that something very serious was the matter, screamed too for help. And at the various doors appeared one after another Primo Genday and Tropiczo in their shirt-sleeves, and Mendez with a cotton handkerchief tied over his ears.

Segundo stood silent in the middle of the room, uncertain what course to pursue. To leave the room would be cowardly, to remain—— Tropiczo shook him.

“Go, flying, to Vilamorta, boy!” he said. “Tell Doroteo, the cabman, to go to Orense and bring back a doctor with him—the best he can find. I don’t want to make a trip this time,” he added with a wink. “Run, hurry off!”

The Swan approached Nieves, who had thrown herself on the sofa and was weeping, her face covered with her dainty handkerchief.

“They want me to go for a doctor, Nieves. What shall I do?”

“Go!”

“Shall I return?”

“No—for God’s sake leave me. Go bring the doctor! go bring the doctor!” And she sobbed more violently than before.

In spite of all Segundo’s haste, the physician did not arrive in Las Vides until early on the morning of the following day. He did not think the case an unusual one. This disease often terminated in this way, in paralysis; it was one of the most frequent complications of the terrible malady. He added that it would be well to remove the patient to Orense, taking suitable precautions. The removal was effected without much difficulty, and Don Victoriano lived for a few days longer. Twenty-four hours after the interment Nieves and Victorina, attired in the deepest mourning, departed for the capital.

XXIII.

THE black pall of winter has fallen over Vilamorta. It is raining, and in the wet and muddy main street and plaza no one is to be seen but occasionally some countryman, riding enveloped in his grass cloth cloak, his horse's hoofs clattering on the stone pavement, raising showers of mud. There are now no fruit-venders for the simple reason that there is no fruit; all is deserted, damp, muddy, and gloomy; Cansin, in listing slippers, a comforter around his neck, walks up and down unceasingly before his door, to prevent chilblains; the Alcalde avails himself of a very narrow arch in front of his house to pass away the afternoon, walking ten steps up and ten steps down, stamping energetically to keep his feet warm—an exercise which he affirms to be indispensable to his digestion.

Now indeed the little town seems lifeless! There are neither visitors to the springs nor strangers from the surrounding country, neither fairs nor vintages. Everywhere reigns the stillness and solitude of the tomb, and a moisture so persistent that it covers

with a minute green vegetation the stones of the houses in course of construction. These little towns in winter are enough to make the most cheerful person low-spirited; they are the very acme of tedium, the quintessence of dullness—the disinclination to arrange one's hair, to change one's dress, the interminable evenings, the persistent rain, the gloomy cold, the ashen atmosphere, the leaden sky!

In the midst of this species of lethargy in which Vilamorta is plunged there are, however, some happy beings, beings who are now at the summit of felicity, although soon destined to end their existence in the most tragic manner; beings who, by their natural instinct alone, have divined the philosophy of Epicurus and practice it, and eat, drink, and make merry, and neither fear death nor think of the unexplored region which opens its gates to the dying, beings who receive the rain on their smooth skins with rejoicing, beings for whom the mud is a luxurious bath in which they roll and wallow with delight, abandoning the discomfort and narrowness of their lairs and sties. They are the indisputable lords and masters of Vilamorta at this season of the year; they who with their pomps and exploits supply the reunions at the apothecary's with food for conversation, and entertainment for familiar gatherings in

which their respective sizes are discussed and they are studied from the point of view of their personal qualities, heated discussions taking place as to whether the short or the long ear, the curly tail, the hoof more or less curved upward, and the snout more or less pointed, augur the more succulent flesh and the more abundant fat. Comparisons are made. Pellejo's hog is superb as far as size is concerned, but its flesh, of an erysipelatous rosy hue, and its immense flabby belly, betray the hog of relaxed muscle, nourished on bakehouse refuse; a magnificent swine, that of the Alcalde, which has been fed on chestnuts, not so large as the other, but what hams it will make! What hams! And what bacon! And what a back, broad enough to ride upon! This will be the swine of the season. There are not wanting those who affirm, however, that the queen of the swine of Vilamorta is the pig of Aunt Gáspara, García's pig. The haunches of this magnificent animal look like a highroad; it once came near being suffocated by its own fat; its teats touch its hoofs and kiss the mud of the road. Who can calculate how many pounds of lard it will yield, and the black puddings it will fill with its blood, and the sausages that its intestines will make?

It stops raining for a week; the cold grows more

intense, frost falls, whitening the grass of the paths and hardening the ground. This is the signal for the hecatomb, for which the auspices are now favorable, for, in addition to the cold, the moon is in her last quarter; if she were on the wane the flesh would spoil. The hour has come for wielding the knife. And through the long nights of Vilamorta resound at the most unexpected moments desperate grunts—first grunts of fury, that express the impotent rage of the victim at finding himself bound to the bench, and reveal in the degenerate domestic pig the descendant of the wild mountain boar; then of pain, when the knife penetrates the flesh, an almost human cry when its blade pierces the heart, and at last a series of despairing groans which grow fainter and fainter as life and strength escape with the warm stream of blood.

This bloodcurdling drama was being enacted in the house of the lawyer García at eleven o'clock on a clear frosty December night. The girls, wild with delight, and dying with curiosity, crowded around the expiring pig, in whose heart and throat the butcher, with rolled up sleeves and bare arms, was about to plunge the knife. Segundo, shut up in his bedroom, had before him some sheets of paper, more or less covered with scrawls. He was writing verses.

But as the sounds of the tragedy reached him, he dropped his pen with dismay. He had inherited from his mother a profound horror of the spectacle of the killing; it usually cost his mother ten or twelve days of suffering, during which she was unable to eat food, sickened by the sight of the blood, the intestines and the viscera, so like human intestines and human viscera, the greasy fitches of bacon hanging from the roof, and the strong and stimulating odor of the black pudding and spices. Segundo abhorred even the name of pig, and in the morbid condition of his mind, in the nervous excitement which consumed him, it was an indescribable martyrdom to be unable to set his foot outside the door without stumbling against and entangling himself among the accursed and repulsive animals, or seeing, through the half-open doors, portions of their bodies hanging on hooks. All Vilamorta smelled of pig-killing, of warm entrails; Segundo did not know at last where to hide himself, and intrenched himself in his own room, closing the doors and windows tightly, secluding himself from the external world in order to live with his dreams and fancies in a realm where there were no hogs, and where only pine groves, blue flowers and precipices existed. Insufficient precaution to free himself from the torture of that brutal

epoch of the year, since here in his own house he was besieged by the drama of gluttony and realism. The poet seized his hat and hurried out of the room. He must flee where these grunts could not penetrate, where those smells should not surround him. He walked along the hall, closing his eyes in order not to see, by the light of the candle which one of the children was holding, Aunt Gáspara with her skeleton-like arm, bare to the elbow, stirring a red and frothing liquid in a large earthen pan. When they saw Segundo leaving the house the sisters burst into shouts of laughter, and called to him, offering him grotesque delicacies, ignoble spoils of the dying.

Leocadia had not retired; she felt ill and she was dozing in a chair, wrapped in a shawl and shivering with cold; she opened the door quickly to Segundo, asking him in alarm if anything had happened. Nothing, indeed. They were killing the pig at home—a Toledan night; they would not let him sleep. Besides, the night was so cold—he felt somewhat indisposed—as if he had a chill. Would she make him a cup of coffee, or better still, a rum punch?

“Both, my heart, this very instant!”

Leocadia recovered her spirits and her energy as if by enchantment. Soon there rose from the punch-bowl the sapphire flame of the punch. In its glare

the schoolmistress's face seemed very thin. It had lost its former healthy color, a warm brown like that of the crust of a well-baked loaf. The pangs of disappointed love were revealed in the pallor of her cheeks, in the feverish brightness of her eyes, the purplish hue of her lips. Grief had given her prosaic features an almost poetic stamp; as she had grown thinner her eyes looked larger; she was not now the robust woman, with firm flesh and fresh-colored lips, who, pitted though she was by the smallpox, could still draw a coarse compliment from the tavern-keeper; the fire of an imperious, uncontrollable, and exacting passion was consuming her inwardly—the love which comes late in life, that devouring love which reason cannot conquer, nor time uproot, nor circumstances change, which fixes its talons in the vitals and releases its prey only when it has destroyed it.

And this love was of so singular a nature that,—insatiable, volcanic, desperate, as it was,—far from dictating acts of violence to Leocadia and drawing from her furious reproaches, it inspired her with a self-abnegation and a generosity without limits, banishing from her mind every thought of self.

The summer, the vintage season, the whole period

during which she had scarcely seen Segundo, when she knew he had not given her a passing thought, that he was devoting himself to another woman, had been horrible for her; and yet not a jealous word, not a complaint had crossed her lips, nor did she once regret having given Segundo the money; and when she saw the poet, her joy was so genuine, so profound, that it effaced, as if by magic, the remembrance of her sufferings and repaid her for them a hundredfold.

Now there was an additional reason why she should lavish her affection upon the poet. He too was suffering, he was ill. What was the matter with him? He himself did not know: hypochondria, the grief of separation, spleen, the impatient disgust produced by the contrast of his mean surroundings with the dreams that filled his imagination. A constant inappetency, depression of spirits, an uneasy sensation in the stomach, nerves on the stretch, like the strings of a guitar. And his love for Nieves was not like Leocadia's love, one of those passions that absorb the whole being, affect the heart, attenuate the flesh, and subjugate the soul. Nieves lived only in his imagination, in his vanity, in his lyrics, in his romantic reveries, those eternal inspirers of love.

Nieves was the visible incarnation, in beautiful and alluring form, of his longings for fame, his literary ambition.

Leocadia had served the punch and was pouring out the coffee when, her hand trembling with pleasure and emotion, she spilled some of the hot liquid, scalding herself slightly; she took no notice of the burn, however, but went on, with the same solicitude as always, to minister to Segundo's comfort. Thinking to please and interest the poet she asked him for news of the volume of poems which he had in hand, and which was to spread his fame far beyond Vilamorta, so soon as it should be published in Orense. Segundo did not show much enthusiasm at this prospect.

"In Orense," he said, "in Orense—— Do you know that I have changed my mind? Either I shall publish it in Madrid or I shall not publish it at all. The loss to Spanish literature would not be so very great."

"And why don't you want to publish it now in Orense?"

"I will tell you. Roberto Blanquez is right in the advice he gives me in a letter he has just written me from Madrid. You know that Roberto is in a situation there. He says that no one reads books pub-

lished in the provinces; that he has noticed the contempt with which books that do not bear the imprint of some publishing house of the capital are looked upon there. And besides, that they delay a century here in printing a volume, and when it is printed it is full of errors, and unattractive in appearance—in short, that they do not take. And therefore——”

“Well, then, let the book be published in Madrid. How much would it cost?”

“Child, the prices Roberto tells me are enough to frighten one. It seems that the affair would cost a fortune. No publisher will buy verses or even share with the author the expense of publishing them.”

Leocadia answered only by a smile. The little parlor had a look of homelike comfort. Although winter had despoiled the balcony of its charms, turning the sweet basil yellow and withering the carnations, within, the hissing of the coffee-pot, the alcoholic vapor of the punch, the quietude, the solicitous affection of the schoolmistress, all seemed to temper and soften the atmosphere. Segundo felt a pleasant drowsiness stealing over him.

“Will you give me a blanket from your bed?” he said to the schoolmistress. “There is not a spot at

home where I could rest to-night. I might sleep a little on the sofa here."

"You will be cold."

"I shall be in heaven. Go."

Leocadia left the room, and returned dragging in with her an unwieldy bulk—a mattress; then she brought a blanket; then, pillows. Total, a complete bed. For all that was wanting—only the sheets—she brought them also.

XXIV.

LEOCADIA did not vacillate on the following day. She knew the way and she went straight to the lawyer's house. The latter received her with a frowning brow. Did people think he was coining money? Leocadia had now no land to sell; what she brought was of trifling value. If she made up her mind to mortgage the house he would speak to his brother-in-law Clodio, who had some money saved, and who would like to have some such piece of property. Leocadia breathed a sigh of regret, it was not with her as with the peasantry—she had no attachment to land, but the house! So neat, so pretty, so comfortable, arranged according to her own taste!

“Pshaw, by paying the amount of the mortgage you can have it back the moment you wish.”

So it was settled. Clodio handed out the money, tempted by the hope of obtaining, at half its value, so cozy a nest in which to end his bachelor existence. In the evening Leocadia asked Segundo to show her the manuscript of his poems and to read

some of them to her. Frequent mention was made in them, with reticences and transparent allusions, of certain blue flowers, of the murmur of a pine wood, of a precipice, and of various other things which Leocadia knew well were not inventions, but had their explanation in past, and to her unknown, events. The schoolmistress divined a love story whose heroine could be no one but Nieves Mendez. But what she could not understand, what she could not explain, was how Señora de Comba, now a widow, and free to reward Segundo's love, did not do so immediately. The verses breathed profound despondency, ardent passion, and intense bitterness. Now Leocadia understood Segundo's sadness, his dejection, his mental anguish. How much he must suffer in secret! Poets, by their nature, must suffer more and crueler tortures than the rest of humanity. There was not a doubt of it—this separation, these memories were killing Segundo slowly. Leocadia hesitated how to begin the conversation.

“See, listen. Those verses are beautiful and deserve to be printed in letters of gold. It just happens, child, that I received some money a few days ago from Orense. Do you know what I was thinking of the other night while you were asleep in the little bed I arranged for you? That it would be

better for you to go yourself to publish them—yonder—to Madrid.”

To her great surprise she saw that Segundo's face clouded. To go to Madrid now! Impossible; he must first learn something of Nieves. The last tragic scene of his love affair, the dénouement of her sudden widowhood, raised between them a barrier difficult to pass. Nieves was rich, and if Segundo should go to her now and throw himself at her feet, he would not be the lover asking her to requite his love, but the suitor to her hand, alleging anterior rights and basing on them his aspirations to replace her defunct husband. And Segundo, who had accepted money from Leocadia, felt his pride rebel at the thought that Nieves might take him for a fortune-hunter, or might scorn him for his obscurity and his poverty. But did not Nieves love him? Had she not told him so? Why, then, did she not send him some message. True, he had made no attempt to communicate with the beautiful widow, or to refresh her memory. He feared to do it awkwardly, inopportunately, and so reopen the wound caused by the death of her husband.

The volume of verses—an excellent idea! The volume of verses was the one means of recovering his place in Nieves' recollection worthily, borne on

the wings of popular applause. If this volume were read, admired, praised, it would win fame for its author; the difference between his own and Nieves' social position, which might now make his pretensions appear ridiculous, would disappear. "To marry!" said Segundo to himself. Marriage seemed to him a secondary matter. Let Nieves only love him. It was love he asked, not marriage. Sitting at Leocadia's very table he wrote to Blancoz, giving him instructions, and prepared the manuscript to post it, and made out the index and the title-page with the impatient joy of one who, expecting to win a fortune, buys a ticket in the lottery. When he was gone Leocadia remained sunk in thought. Segundo had no desire to go to Madrid. Then the gleam of happiness that flashed across her mind at the thought that Segundo should establish himself in Vilamorta was quenched by two considerations—one was that Segundo would die of tedium here; the other that she could not long continue to supply his wants. In mortgaging the house she had burned her last cartridge. What should she mortgage now—herself? And she smiled sadly. In the hall resounded the steps of the neglected little cripple, on his way to bed, where Flores would soon lull him to sleep with her solecisms and barbarous litanies. The mother

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sighed. And this being, this being who had no support but her—what should he live on? When ruin had overtaken her, and she could no longer give him food or shelter, what a mute and continual reproach would the presence of the unhappy child be to her! And how could she set him to work?

To work! This word brought to her mind the plans she had matured in those hours of sleeplessness and despair in which all the past is retraced in thought and new plans are formed for the future and every possible course of action is deliberated upon. It was plain that Minguitos was unfitted for the material labor of cultivating the ground, or for making shoes, or grinding chocolate, like that good-looking Ramon; but he knew how to read and write and in arithmetic, with a little help from Leocadia, he would be a prodigy. To sit behind a counter kills nobody; to attend to a customer, to answer his questions, take the money, enter down what is sold, are rather entertaining occupations that cheer the mind than fatiguing labors. In this way the little hunchback would be amused and would lose a little of his terror of strangers, his morbid fear of being laughed at.

A few years before if anyone had proposed to Leocadia to separate her from her child, to deprive him

of the shelter of her loving arms, she would have insulted him. Now it seemed to her so easy and natural a solution of the question to make him a clerk in a shop. Something, nevertheless, still thrilled in the depths of her mother's heart, some fibers still closely attached to the soul, that bled, that hurt. She must tear them away quickly. It was all for the good of the child, to make a man of him, so that to-day or to-morrow——

Leocadia held two or three consultations with Cansin, who had a cousin in Orense, the proprietor of a cloth shop; and Cansin, dilating upon his influence with him, and the importance of the favor, gave the schoolmistress a warm letter of recommendation to him. Leocadia went to the city, saw the shopkeeper, and the conditions on which he agreed to receive Minguitos were agreed upon. The boy would be fed and lodged, his clothes washed, and he would receive an occasional suit, made from the remnants of cloth left over in the shop. As to pay, he would be paid nothing until he should have acquired a thorough knowledge of the business—for a couple of years or so. And was he very much deformed? Because that would not be very pleasant for the customers. And was he honest? He

had never taken any money out of his mother's drawer, had he?

Leocadia returned home with her soul steeped in gall. How should she tell Minguitos and Flores? Especially Flores! Impossible, impossible — she would create a scandal that would alarm the neighborhood. And she had promised to take Minguitos without fail on the following Monday! A stratagem occurred to her. She said that a relative of hers lived in Orense and that she wished to take the child there to make his acquaintance. She depicted the journey in glowing colors, so that Minguitos might think he was going on a pleasure trip. Did he not want to see Orense again? It was a magnificent town. She would show him the hot springs, the Cathedral. The child, with an instinctive horror of public places, of coming in contact with strangers, sorrowfully shook his head; and as for the old servant, as if she divined what was going on, she raged and stormed all the week. When Sunday came and mother and son were about to take their departure in the stage-coach Flores threw her arms around the neck of the boy as he was mounting the step, and embraced him with the tremulous and doting fondness of a grandmother, covering his face with kisses,

and moistening it with the saliva on her withered lips. She spent the rest of the day sitting in the doorway, muttering words of rage, or of tender pity, her forehead pressed between her hands in an attitude of despair.

Leocadia, once they were in the diligence, tried to convince the boy that the change was for his good; describing to him the pleasant life that awaited him in that fine shop situated in the most central part of Orense, which was so lively, where he would have very little to do, and where he had the hope of earning, if not to-day, to-morrow, a little money for himself. At her first words the boy fixed on his mother his astonished eyes, in which a look of intelligence gradually began to dawn. Minguitos was quick of comprehension. He drew up close to his mother, and laid his head down on her lap without speaking.

As he continued silent, Leocadia said to him:

“What is the matter with you? Does your head ache?”

“No; let me sleep so—for a little—until we reach Orense.”

And thus he remained, quiet and silent, lulled to sleep, apparently, by the creaking of the diligence and the deafening noise of the windows rattling in

their sashes. When they reached the city Leocadia touched him on the shoulder, saying:

“We have arrived.”

They alighted from the stagecoach and then only did Leocadia observe that her lap was moist and that, on the spot where the boy had rested his forehead, sparkled two or three crystal drops. But on finding himself among strangers, in the gloomy shop crowded with rolls of dark cloth, the hunchback’s attitude ceased to be resigned; he caught hold of his mother’s skirt with a despairing impulse, uttering a single cry in which were concentrated all his reproaches, all his affection:

“M-a-a-a-m-m-a—m-a-a-a-m-m-a!”

This cry still resounded through Leocadia’s heart when, on her arrival at Vilamorta, she saw Flores lying in wait for her in the doorway. Lying in wait is the exact expression, for Flores threw herself upon her, the moment she appeared, like a bulldog, like a wild animal asking for and demanding her young. And as a man in a fit of rage throws at his adversary whatever he finds nearest his hand so Flores heaped on Leocadia every species of insult, all sorts of injurious and opprobrious epithets, crying, in a voice that trembled with rage and hatred:

“Thief, thief, wretch! What have you done with your child, thief? Go, drunkard, vagabond, go drink your liqueurs—and your child, perhaps, dying of hunger! Reprobate, wolf, traitress, where is the child? Where is the little angel? Where have you hidden him, schemer? In such a hurry you were to get rid of him so as to be left alone with your trumpery young gentleman! Wolf, wolf—if I had a gun, as sure as I am standing here, I would send a charge of shot into you!”

Leocadia, her face pale, her eyes red with weeping, put out her hand to stop the mouth of the frenzied old woman; but the latter caught her fingers between her toothless gums, biting them and slavering them with the foam of her fury, and when the schoolmistress went upstairs, the old woman followed her, crying after her in hoarse and sinister accents:

“You will never have the grace of God, wolf—God and the Holy Virgin will punish you! Go, go, rejoice now because you have carried out your evil designs! May you be forever accursed, accursed, accursed!”

The malediction made Leocadia shudder. The house, with Minguitos away, seemed like a tomb.

Flores had neither made the dinner nor lighted the lamp. Leocadia, too sick at heart to do either, threw herself on the bed, dressed as she was, and, later on, undressed herself and went to bed without tasting a morsel of food.

XXV.

WITH what interest did Segundo read the letters of Roberto Blanquez giving him news of his book. Roberto was a few years older than the Swan; the difference in their ages was not so great as to prevent their having been very good friends when they were at college together, though it was great enough to have given Blanquez so much more experience than the poet as to enable him to serve as his guide and mentor. Blanquez, too, had had his poetic epoch, when he had written Galician verses; he now devoted himself to the prose of a modest clerkship, and wrote official articles. Madrid was enlightening him, and, with the natural penetration of one in whose veins flowed Galician blood, he was gradually acquiring a knowledge of practical life. He entertained for Segundo a fanatic admiration and a sincere attachment, one of those college attachments which last a lifetime. Segundo wrote to him with entire confidence—some cousins of Blanquez were acquainted with the mother of Nieves Mendez, and through this channel Segundo occasionally received tidings of his lady-love. Blanquez

was not ignorant of the episodes of the summer. And in the beginning his news was very satisfactory : "Nieves lives in the greatest retirement—my cousins have given me news of her. She scarcely ever leaves the house except to go to mass. The child is not well. The physicians say it is the age. They are going to send her to a convent of the Sacred Heart to be educated. They say the mother looks superb, my boy. It seems they have been left very well off. The book will soon appear now. Yesterday I chose the paper for the edition and the linen paper for the hundred copies *de luxe*. The type will be Elzevir, which is at present the most fashionable. The title-page—they make them beautiful now, in six colors—would you like it to represent something fanciful, something allegorical?" In this style were Roberto's letters, source of illusions for Segundo, sole food for his imagination through all that long and gloomy winter, in that out-of-the-way corner of the world, in the midst of his prosaic domestic surroundings, his mind filled with the recollections of his unhappy passion.

March had arrived, that uncertain month of sunshine and showers which heralds in the spring with affluence of violets and primroses, when the cold begins to lessen, and in the pale blue sky white

clouds float like streamers, when Segundo received that most precious of all objects, that object the sight of which makes the heart palpitate with joy and longing, mingled with an undefinable fear resembling, somewhat, the feeling with which the new-made father regards his first-born—his first printed book. It seemed to him a dream that the book should be there, before his eyes, in his hands, with the satin-smooth white cover on which the artist had gracefully twined around a group of pine trees a few sprays of forget-me-nots; with its pea-green paper, that gave it an antique air, the compositions headed by three mysterious asterisks. Looking at his verses thus, free from blots, finished and correct, the thought standing out clearly in distinct black characters on the delicately tinted page, he almost felt as if they had issued from his brain just as they were, smoothly flowing and with perfect rhymes, without corrections or unmeaning syllables put in to fill out the meter.

Leocadia was even more moved by the sight of the book than its author had been. She shed tears of joy. The fame of the poet was, in a sense, her work! For two or three days she was happy, forgetting the bad news which Flores brought her every Sunday from Orense; from Orense, where

Leocadia did not dare to go herself, fearing to yield to the entreaties and melt before the prayers of the child, but where palpitated those fibers of her heart which still bled, and which Flores wrung with torture by her account of the sufferings of Minguitos, who declined visibly in health, and who always complained that they made sport of him in the shop and cast up his deformity to him.

Unsolvable mysteries of the human heart! Segundo, who despised his native place, who believed—nor was he mistaken—that there was not in Vilamorta a single person capable of judging of the merits of a poem, could not refrain from going one evening to Saturnino Agonde's and drawing carelessly the volume from his pocket, throwing it on the counter and saying with affected indifference:

“What do you think of that book, my boy?”

On the instant he repented of his weakness, so many were the nonsensical remarks and absurd jokes with which the beautiful volume inspired the irreverent assemblage. He wished he had never shown it. He had drawn all this upon himself. If the public did not treat him better than his fellow-townsmen! Man can never isolate himself completely from his surroundings—the circle in which he moves must always have an interest for him. However

little importance Segundo might attach to the opinions of the Vilamortans, and although their approbation would assuredly not have raised him in his own estimation, their stupid mockery wounded and embittered his soul. He went home hurt and pained. He spent a feverish night—one of those nights in which great projects are conceived and decisive resolutions adopted.

His resolutions and his plans he summed up in the letter he wrote to Blanquez. The latter did not answer by return of mail; days passed, and Segundo went every morning to the post-office, always meeting with the same laconic answer. At last one day he received a voluminous registered letter.

XXVI.

As he opened it, several newspapers fell out, containing notices marked by a cross of the volume of poems just published, entitled "Songs of Absence," this being the name chosen by Segundo for his volume of rhymes.

These were accompanied by a letter of four pages from Roberto. What it might contain was of such vital importance to Segundo, so great the influence it might exercise over his future, that he laid it aside fearing, he knew not why, to read it, wishing to defer what he so eagerly desired. The letter lay open before him and certain names, certain words frequently repeated, caught his eye. The name of the widowed Señora de Comba was often mentioned in it. To calm his agitation, which was purely nervous, he took up the newspapers, resolving to read first the marked paragraphs. He traversed the *via crucis*, in the fullest signification of the words.

El Imperial gave a noisy boom to Galicia and, as a proof that the country produced poets in the same abundance as it produced exquisite peaches and

beautiful flowers mentioned, without naming him, the author of "Songs of Absence," a beautiful volume just published. And not a line more, not a word of criticism, nothing to indicate that anybody in the office of the popular daily had taken the trouble even to cut the leaves of the book. *El Liberal*, better informed, declared, in three lines, that "Songs of Absence" gave evidence of the author's great facility in versification. *La Epoca*, in the most obscure corner of its department, "New Books," eulogized the typographical elegance of the book; disapproved of the romantic savor of the title and of the title-page, and deplored in trenchant phrases that the poet should have sought inspiration in the barren theme of absence when there were so many wholesome, cheerful and fruitful subjects on which to write. *El Dia*——

Ah, as for *El Dia*, it gave Segundo a castigation in style: not one of those angry, predetermined, energetic castigations, in which the lash is taken up with both hands to crush a powerful and dangerous adversary, but a contemptuous cut of the whip, a flick with the nail, as it were, as one might brush away a troublesome insect; one of those summary criticisms in which the critic does not take the trouble to adduce proof or argument in support of his criticisms,

whose justice he deems so evident as not to require demonstration; an execution by a few jests, but jests of a kind that extinguish a new author, crush him, relegate him forever to the limbo of obscurity. The critic said that now when verses of supreme merit lacked readers it was greatly to be deplored that the press should be made to groan with rhymes of an inferior quality; that now when Becquer had been placed in the pantheon of the immortals it was a crime to treat him with the disrespect of stupidly imitating him, mutilating and counterfeiting his best thoughts; and finally, that it was to be regretted that estimable young men, endowed, perhaps, with admirable capabilities for trade, or for the career of an apothecary or a notary, should spend their parents' money in costly editions of verses which no one would either buy or read.

Underneath this philippic Roberto Blanquez had written: "Pay no attention to this ass. Read my article."

And indeed in an obscure, insignificant sheet, one of those innumerable periodicals that see the light in Madrid without Madrid ever seeing them, Blanquez poured forth the gall of his wounded friendship and patriotism—taking the critic to task, eulogizing Segundo's book and declaring him the worthy com-

peer of Becquer, with the difference that the former was a little sweeter, a little more dreamy, a little more melancholy, as being the son of a land as beautiful as it was unfortunate, and which was fairer than Andalusia, than Switzerland, or than any other country on the face of the globe; ending by saying that if Becquer had been born in Galicia he would feel, think, and write like *The Swan of Vilamorta*.

Segundo seized the bundle of newspapers and, after looking at them for a moment fixedly and with a gloomy brow, tore them into pieces, large at first, then small, then smaller still, which he threw out of the window to hover for a moment in the air like butterflies or like the silvery petals of the flower of illusion, and then fall into the nearest pool. Segundo smiled bitterly. "There goes fame," he said to himself. "Now I think I am calmer. Let us see what the letter says."

Of this letter we need cite here only certain passages, supplementing them with the comments made on them in his mind by the reader.

"According to your request I went to the house of Señora de Comba to deliver to her the copy, so carefully wrapped up and sealed, which you sent me for that purpose."—Of course. It contained an inscription which I did not want her to think that you

might have read.—“She has a beautiful house, hangings and natural flowers everywhere.”—Everything pertaining to her is like that, beautiful and refined.—“But I was obliged to return several times before she would receive me, the moment was always inopportune.”—She does not receive indiscriminately all who may chance to present themselves.—“At last she received me, after innumerable ceremonies and formalities. She is very beautiful close by, more beautiful, even, than at a distance, and it seems impossible that she should have a daughter twelve years old; she looks at most twenty-four or twenty-five.”—What news Roberto has to tell me.—“The moment I told her I had come on your part”—Let us hear—“she became—what shall I say?”—red—“displeased and annoyed, my boy, and in addition so serious, that I was quite taken aback, and did not know what to do.”—Infamous! Infamous!—“She was afraid that I”—Let us hear; let us finish, let us finish.—“She refused to receive the book, in spite of my urgent entreaties”—but this is inconceivable. Ah, what a woman!—“because she says it would remind her too forcibly of that place and of the death of her husband, whom God keep in his glory; and consequently she begs you to excuse her”—wretch!—“from opening the package and reading

your verse, for which she thanks you.”—Ha! ha! ha!—Bravo! What an actress!

“Notwithstanding all this, as you had charged me explicitly to deliver it to her, I determined not to take the book back with me and, taking up my hat and saluting her, I laid your package on a table. On the following morning, however, it came back to me unopened, with all its seals intact.”—And I did not throw her into the Avieiro that day when our lips—the more fool I! Well, let us finish.

“In view of the little widow’s conduct I imagine that you must have invented all that about the window and the precipice; you must have told it to me to fool me or, as you are so imaginative, you dreamed that it happened and you took the dream for reality.”—He does well to mock me.—“At all events, my boy, if you were interested in the widow, think no more about her. I know to a certainty, through my cousins, who have it for a fact from their father, that at the expiration of the period of her mourning she is to marry a certain Marquis de Cameros who represented at one time a district in Lugo.”—Yes, yes, I understand.—“The thing is serious, for, according to what my cousins say, the house linen is being embroidered already with the coronet of a marchioness.”

The letter was torn still more slowly and into still smaller pieces than the newspapers. With the fragments Segundo made a ball which he threw far into the middle of the pool. "Such is love," he said to himself, laughing bitterly.

He began to walk up and down the room, at first with a certain monotonous regularity, then restlessly and with fury. Clara, the eldest of his sisters, half opened the door of the room, saying:

"Aunt Gàspara says you are to come."

"What for?"

"Dinner is ready."

Segundo took his hat and rushing into the street walked toward the river, filled with that species of fury which one who has just received some mental shock, some bitter disappointment, is apt to feel at being called on to take part in any of the ordinary concerns of life.

XXVII.

WHAT a walk was his along the marshy borders of the Avieiro! At times he hurried on without any motive for accelerating his steps, and again, equally without motive, stood still, his gaze riveted on some object but in reality seeing nothing. One regret, a gnawing grief, pierced his soul when he recalled the past. As in a shipwreck there is for each of the passengers some one particular object whose loss he deploras more bitterly than that of all his other possessions, so Segundo, of all his past life, regretted one instant above every other, an instant which he would have given all he possessed to live over again—that during which he had stood with Nieves on the edge of the precipice, when he might have obtained a worthy and glorious death, carrying with him into the abyss the precious treasure of his illusions, and the form of the woman who for that one unforgettable instant only, had truly loved him.

“A coward then, and a coward now!” thought the poet, calling all his resolution to his aid but finding himself unable to summon the necessary courage

to throw himself at once into the cold and muddy waters of the river. What moments of anguish! Giddy with suffering he seated himself on a stone on the river bank and watched with idiotic vacancy of expression the circles formed on the bosom of the river by the drops of rain that fell slantingly from the gray sky, as they expanded and were lost in other circles that pressed upon them on all sides, while new circles took their place, to be lost in their turn in yet other circles, covering the surface of the water with a wavy design resembling the silver work called *guilloché*. The poet did not even notice that these same rain-drops that fell thick and fast on the surface of the Avieiro fell also on his hat and shoulders, ran down his forehead and, making their way between his collar and his skin, trickled down his neck. He noticed it only when the chill they produced made him shiver and he rose and walked slowly home, where dinner was already over and no one thought of offering him even so much as a cup of broth.

Two or three days later a fever declared itself, which was at first slight, but soon grew serious. Tropiezo called it a gastric and catarrhal fever, and truth compels us to say that he administered remedies not altogether inappropriate; gastric

and catarrhal fevers are, for physicians whose knowledge is derived chiefly from experience, a perfect boon from Heaven, a glorious field in which they may count every battle a victory; a beaten path in which they run no risk of going astray. It will not lead them to the unknown pole of science, but at least it will betray them into no abyss.

As Tropiezo was leaving Garcia's house one evening, after his customary visit to Segundo, muffled up to the ears in his comforter, he saw, standing beside the lawyer's door in the shadow cast by the contiguous wall, a woman clad in an old morning gown and with her head bare. The night was bright and Don Fermin was able to distinguish her features, but it was not without some difficulty that he recognized her to be Leocadia, so altered and aged did the poor schoolmistress look. Her countenance betrayed the keenest anxiety as she asked the doctor:

"And what news, Don Fermin? How is Segundo getting on?"

"Ah, good evening, Leocadia. Do you know that at first I did not recognize you?—Well, very well; there is no cause for uneasiness. To-day I ordered him some of the *puchero* and some soup. It was nothing—a cold caught by getting a wetting. But

the boy seems a little preoccupied, and he was for a time so sad and dejected that I thought he was never going to get back his appetite. At this season it is necessary to go warmly clad; we have a fine day, and then, when you least expect it, back come the rain and the cold again. And you—how are you getting on? They tell me that you have not been well, either. You must take care of yourself.”

“There is nothing the matter with me, Don Fermin.”

“So much the better. Any news of the boy?”

“He is in Orense, poor child. He can't get used to it.”

“He will get used to it by and by. Of course—accustomed to be petted. Well, Leocadia, good-night. Go home, my dear woman, go home.”

Don Fermin proceeded on his way, drawing his comforter up closer around his ears. That woman was mad; she had not taken the disease lightly, it seemed. And how altered she was! How old she had grown in these last few months! Old women were worse than young girls when they fell in love. He had done wisely, very wisely in telling her nothing about Segundo's new plans. She was capable of tearing down the house if he had told her. No,

silence, silence. A shut mouth catches no flies. Let her find it out through someone else besides him. And with these sensible ideas and worthy intentions Tropiczo reached Agonde's, and before a quarter of an hour had elapsed unbosomed himself of his news: Segundo García was going to America to seek his fortune—as soon as he should be entirely well, of course. He would take the steamer at Corunna.

The occasion was a favorable one for the company to lament once more in concert the death of Don Victoriano Andres de la Comba, protector and father of all the Vilamortans in want of situations, a useful representative and an untiring worker for the district. If he were alive now most assuredly a young man of so much ability—a poet—that night the party all agreed that Segundo had ability and was a poet—would not be obliged to go across the raging seas in quest of a decent situation. But since they had lost Don Victoriano, Vilamorta was without a voice in the regions of influence and favor, for Señorito de Romero, the present representative of the district, belonged to the class of docile representatives who give no trouble to the Government, who vote when their votes are wanted, and who hold themselves cheap, valuing themselves at no more than a few tobacco shops, and half a dozen or so of official

appointments. Agonde took his revenge that night, expatiating on his favorite theme, and abusing the pernicious Eufrasian influence which was responsible for the decadence of Vilamorta, on account of which its youth were obliged to emigrate to the New World. The apothecary expounded his theories—he liked the representative of a district to show himself in it occasionally. Otherwise of what use was he? In his eyes the ideal representative was that famous politician from whom the barber of the town he represented had asked a place, basing his request on the fact that, owing to the distribution of appointments among the persons of his station in the town, there were no customers left for him to shave and he was starving. The Alcalde here interposed, saying that he had it on very good authority that Señorito de Romero intended to interest himself in earnest for Vilamorta; the confectioner and some others of those present confirmed this statement, and then arose a discussion in which it was proved beyond a doubt that a dead representative has no friends and that the new representative of the district had already, in the very stronghold of the former Combista radicals, friends and adherents.

XXVIII.

THE Swan has left his native lake, or rather, his pool; he has crossed the Atlantic on the wings of steam. Will he ever return? Will he come back with a sallow countenance, a disordered liver, and some thousands of dollars, in bills of exchange, in his pocketbook, to end his life where it began, as the ship disabled by storms receives its last repairs in the dockyard in which it was built? Will the black vomit, that terrible malady of the Antilles, the scourge of the Iberians who seek to emulate Columbus conquering a new world, attack him on his arrival on the young continent? Will he remain in the tropics, riding in his carriage, united in the bonds of matrimony to some creole? Will he preside one day over one of those diminutive republics, in which the doctors are generals and the generals doctors? Will his melancholy be cured by the salty kiss of the ocean breeze, by the contact of virgin soil, the sharp spur of necessity, that, pushing him into the conflict, will say to him, "Work"?

History may perhaps at some future day relate

the story of the metamorphosis of the Swan, of his wanderings and his vicissitudes; but years must first elapse, for it was only yesterday, as one might say, that Segundo García quitted Vilamorta, leaving the schoolmistress behind him dissolved in tears. And the story of the schoolmistress is the only episode in the chronicle of the Swan which we can at present bring to an end.

Leocadia was the theme of much gossip in Vilamorta. She was seriously ill, according to some, according to others, ruined, and according to many, touched in her mind. She had been seen haunting the neighborhood of Segundo's house on various nights during the poet's illness; it was affirmed that she had sold her land and that her house was mortgaged to Clodio Genday; but the strangest thing of all, that which was most bitterly censured, was her neglect of her son after having cared for him and watched over him from his infancy, never going to Orense to see him, while old Flores went there constantly, bringing back worse and worse news of the child every time she went—that he was wasting away, that he spit blood, that he was dying of grief, that he would not last a month. Leocadia, as she listened, would let her chin fall upon her breast, and at times her shoulders would move convulsively, as if she were weeping,

Otherwise she appeared calm, although she was very silent and had lost her former activity. She helped Flores in the kitchen, attended to the children of the school, swept and dusted—all like an automaton, while Flores, who pitilessly spied out every occasion to find fault with her, took pleasure in crying:

“Woman, you have left this side of the pan dirty—woman, you haven’t mended your skirt—woman, what are you thinking about? I am going to Orense to-day and you will have to take care of the *puchero*.”

At the end of the summer Clodio demanded the interest on his loan and Leocadia was unable to pay it; she was notified accordingly that, after the necessary legal proceedings, the creditor would avail himself of his legal right to take possession of the house. This was a terrible blow for Leocadia.

It will sometimes happen that a prisoner, a distinguished personage, a king, it may be, shut up through an adverse fate within the walls of a dungeon, stripped of his grandeur, deprived of all that once constituted his happiness, will bear his ills for years with resignation, calm in appearance although dejected, but if some day, by the cruel tyranny of his jailors, this prisoner is deprived of some bauble, some trifling object for which he had conceived an affection, the grief pent up within his bosom will

burst its bounds, and the wildest manifestations of grief will follow. Something like this happened to Leocadia when she learned that she must abandon forever the beloved little house where she had spent in Segundo's company hours unique in her existence; the little house in which she was mistress, which had been rebuilt with her savings, the little house lately so neat and so attractive, of which she was so proud.

Flores heard her on several nights sobbing loudly, but when on one or two occasions, moved by an involuntary feeling of pity, the old woman went into her room to ask her what ailed her, if she could do anything for her, Leocadia, covering her face with the bedclothes, had answered in a dull voice: "There is nothing the matter with me, woman; let me sleep. You will not even let me sleep!"

During those days her moods varied constantly and she formed a thousand different plans. She talked of going to live in Orense, of giving up the school and taking sewing to do in the house; she talked, too, of accepting the proposal of Clodio Genday, who, having dismissed his young servant, for what reason no one knew, offered to take Leocadia as his housekeeper, by which arrangement she would remain in her house, Flores, of course, being dismissed. None of these plans lasted for more than

a very short time, but were all in turn rejected to give place to others no less ephemeral; and while the schoolmistress was thus engaged in forming and rejecting plans the time was fast approaching when she should find herself without a shelter.

One market day Leocadia went to purchase various articles urgently needed by Flores, among others a sieve and a new chocolate-pot, the old one being no longer fit for use. The movement of the crowd, the jostling of the hucksters, and the glare of the autumnal sun made her head, weak from want of sleep, from fasting, and from suffering—slightly dizzy. She stopped before a stall where sieves were sold, a sort of variety booth, where innumerable indispensable trifles were for sale—chocolate-beaters, frying-pans, saucepans, kerosene lamps. In a corner were two articles of merchandise in great request in the place—consisting of pink paper, soft, like brown paper, and some whitish powder, resembling spoiled flour. Leocadia's glance fell on these, and the vender, thinking she wished to buy some, began to extol their properties, explaining that the pink sheets moistened and placed on a plate, would not leave a fly alive in the neighborhood, and that the white powder was *seneca*, for killing mice, the manner of using it being to mix it well with cheese and place

the mixture, made into little balls, in their haunts. Leocadia asked the price and told the vender to give her a small quantity, and the woman, to appear generous, took up a good portion on the spatula, wrapped it up in paper, and gave it to her for a trifling sum. The drug indeed was of little value, being very common in that part of the country, where native arsenic abounds in the calcareous spar forming one of the banks of the Avieiro, and arsenic acid—rat-poison—is sold openly in the fairs, rather than in drug shops. The schoolmistress put away the powder, bought, through complaisance, half a dozen of the pink slips of paper, and on her return home punctually delivered to Flores the articles she had been commissioned to purchase.

Flores noticed that after dinner Leocadia shut herself up in her bedroom, where the old woman could hear her talking aloud as if she were praying. Accustomed to her eccentricities the servant thought nothing about the matter. When she had ended her prayer, the schoolmistress stepped out on the balcony, where she stood gazing for a long time at the flower-pots; she then went into the parlor and looked for a good while also at the sofa, the chairs, the little table, the spots which reminded her of the past. Then she went into the kitchen. Flores

declared afterward—but in such cases, who is there that does not lay claim to a prophetic instinct—that Leocadia's manner on entering had attracted her attention.

“Have you any fresh water?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Give me a glass of it.”

Flores affirmed that, as she took the glass, the hand of the schoolmistress trembled, as if she had a chill, and the strangest part of the matter was that, although there was no sugar in the water, Leocadia asked for a spoon, which she put into the glass. An hour, or perhaps an hour and a half passed, when Flores heard Leocadia groan. She hurried to her room and saw her lying on the bed, her face frightfully pale, making desperate and fruitless efforts to vomit. Then a cold perspiration broke out on the forehead of the sick woman, and she remained motionless and speechless. Flores, terrified, ran for Don Fermin, urging him to hurry, saying this was no jesting matter. When Don Fermin arrived out of breath, he asked :

“What is this, Leocadia? What is the matter with you; my dear woman, what is the matter with you?”

Opening her dilated eyes, she murmured :

“Nothing, Don Fermin, nothing.”

Standing on the table at the head of the bed was the glass; it contained no water, but the bottom and the sides of the vessel were coated with a white powder which had remained undissolved and which the schoolmistress, not wishing to leave it there, had scraped off in places with the spoon. It is proper to say, on this occasion also, that the illustrious Tropiezo made no mistake in the treatment of so simple a case. Tropiezo had already fought some battles with this common toxic substance and knew its tricks; he had recourse, without a moment's delay, to the use of powerful emetics and of oil. Only the poison, having gained the start of him, had already entered into the circulation and ran through the veins of the schoolmistress, chilling her blood. When the nausea and the vomiting ceased several little red spots—an eruption similar to that of scarlet-fever—made their appearance on Leocadia's pallid face. This symptom lasted until death came to set her sad spirit free and release it from its sufferings, which was toward daybreak. Shortly before her death, during an interval of freedom from pain, Leocadia, making a sign to Flores to come nearer, whispered in her ear: “Promise me—that the child shall not know it—by the soul of your mother—

don't tell him—don't tell him the manner of my death."

A few days later Tropiezo was defending himself to the party at Agonde's who, for the pleasure of making him angry, were accusing him of being responsible for the death of the school-mistress.

"For one thing, they called me too late, much too late," he said; "when the woman was almost in her death agony. For another, she had taken a quantity of arsenic which was not large enough to produce vomiting, but which was too small to cause merely a colic and be done with it. Where I made the mistake was in waiting so long before sending for the priest. I did it with the best intentions, so as not to frighten her and hoping we might yet pull her through. When extreme unction was administered she had no senses left to know what was going on."

"So that," said Agonde maliciously, "where you are called in, either the soul or the body is sure to meet with a trip."

The company applauded the joke, and there followed funereal jests mingled with expressions of pity. Clodio Genday, the creditor of the deceased, moved about uneasily in his chair. What stupid

conversation, *canario!* Let them talk of more cheerful subjects!

And they talked of very cheerful and satisfactory subjects indeed. Señorito de Romero had promised to put a telegraph-office in Vilamorta; and the newspapers were saying that, owing to the increasing importance of the viticultural interests of the Border, a branch railroad was needed for which the engineers were soon coming to survey the ground.

THE END.

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